

Britain under Blair 17/2/01

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When Tony Blair and his wife Cheri moved in 10 Downing Street in 1997, he was welcomed as a whiff of fresh air after 18 years of conservative rule. He was the youngest prime minister aged 43 years, since Henry Addington in 1801. He was hailed as a master statesman; some even compared him with Winston Churchill, the wartime hero Prime Minister of United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister was soon recognized for his style and class leaving many European leaders far behind, even generating jealousies as his domestic policies like introduction of complete independence to the Bank of England and control over interest rates produced a positive result. This radical departure from known labour policies resulted in the lowest interest rates for 48 years with low unemployment and inflation.

J L Basford once said about style: "One who uses many periods is a philosopher, many interrogations, a student; many exclamations, a fanatic."

There were many other areas for which Blair could rightly claim credit, and we will review them later in this column, but let us see why and how Blair has bruised himself politically. At present it would not be out of place if the government of Tony Blair was compared with the state of Clarence House, the residence of the late Queen mother. Reports have indicated that about 7.2 million dollars would be required to renovate the place where the curtains were falling apart and the red felt carpet was in shreds. But can dollars salvage Tony Blair?

The place had not been painted for the last fifty years, asbestos was falling everywhere and the electric wiring looked like the similar to the kind that existed inside our own walled city of Lahore.

Now let us see whether the situation was as much alarming as is the condition of Queen mother's former residence.

A quick review over the period Blair has been in power would suggest that dishonesty did creep up but media love for the Blairs allowed them to escape the critical scrutiny that goes with public figures.

For example, the donations received by Blair and the Labour party from Wealthy Indian nationals, although improper keeping in view the strict standards practiced by major political parties and their leaders, were violated and one could see a partisan approach of the British government on India-Pakistan relations. Who said money does not work?

If we go through the statements issued by former British foreign secretary Robin Cook, one feels that his speechwriter was on the payroll of the Indian foreign office and not the British government.

Mr Cook tried to create an impression as if he was the controller of Pakistan's foreign policy.

At times he spoke even louder than L K Advani and George Fernandes, slipping to levels that were even louder than the standard of Bal Thackeray and Gujarat Chief Minister Modi, all this to appease the Indians. This Pakistan bashing did not help the cause of Blair or the Labour party, as many voters who normally vote Labour, crossed over to the third party or even to the conservatives. But still Blair continued to ride on a crest of success, forgetting on the way what Swift said: "And he gave it for his opinion, that whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of

politicians put together."

When wife Cheri was caught on the wrong foot seeking help from a convicted felon, trying to purchase a flat cheaper, the storm raised by this act quickly died down. This time the media bailed them out by projecting the economic gains of Britain under Blair.

Now when Blair made history by earning the honour of being Britain's longest serving prime minister breaking the record created by Clement Attlee, whose Labour government ran for six years and 92 days, there was stunned silence all around.

Normally with Blair, now 50 years old, this achievement called for a celebration, but the milestone has been overtaken by questions about the way Blair took Britain to war. The apparent suicide of David Kelly, the defense ministry weapons expert has dampened the atmosphere. The British Prime Minister, who is on a vacation in Barbados may have to cut his holiday short, in case he is summoned to testify in the judicial inquiry into Kelly's death.

The scientist was named as the source by the BBC for its report, that the British government exaggerated the threat posed by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the war, in order to justify military action.

The judge holding the inquiry has indicated that he would question Blair about the circumstances that led to Kelly's death. There is an adage in 'Human All to Human' by Nietzsche about suicide: "The relatives of a suicide always take it in bad part that he did not remain alive out of consideration for his family dignity."

The questions now being raised, over the conduct of Blair for the war in Iraq, have resulted in a slump in opinion poll ratings, and it was now

uncertain if Blair would still be in charge of Britain by mid 2006, time for the next general elections. Things could change if spin was able to overcome substance, yet again.

In case the judicial inquiry by Judge Brian Hutton cleared Blair of any wrongdoing, as was being claimed by the Prime Minister, then there was a chance that the stewardship of the country remained with him. Other wise the former foreign secretary or the Chancellor of the Exchequer were potential candidates, who could challenge and dethrone Blair from the party leadership.

Another incident that could seriously hurt Blair is the timing of resignation of Sir Richard Dearlove, the head of Britain's foreign intelligence service.

This retirement it has been speculated will worsen a crisis of confidence in MI-16 over Downing Streets' alleged manipulation of intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Coming back to other achievements of Tony Blair, his granting greater self-rule to Scotland and Wales and a peace accord for Northern Ireland were outstanding acts of political will and wisdom.

Another goal set by Blair remains elusive and that was dropping the pound for Euro. The delay could turn out to be a blessing because of the German experience of joining the single European Currency has not paid off. Although Blair has developed a special relationship with the United States, with the result that he has been branded as a lap dog of President Bush, it has paid Britain dividends in trade and commerce.

In spite of this, Blair was trying to forge a closer relationship in Europe with France and Germany, so that his close relations with the United States do not harm the long-term interests of Britain in the long run. Having said everything, much would depend on the outcome of the Kelly inquiry, Blair's politics will sink or survive with it.

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