

Whatever It Takes: The Real Story of Gordon Brown and New Labour

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This journal's style guide includes, among handy hints on font sizes and hyphenation, advice on whether it is permitted for reviewers to mention books other than the text to be reviewed. Such references are 'discouraged but not prohibited'. Thus admonished, I confess I find it impossible to approach Steve Richards's study of Gordon Brown without at least a nod to other works which also take the story of our last Prime Minister as their central theme.

The expanding universe of New Labour literature has seen books used to set out a manifesto, for catharsis and for revenge. Read Robert Peston's *Brown's Britain*, Tom Bower's *Gordon Brown – Prime Minister*, Paul Routledge's *Gordon Brown* or certain sections of Jonathan Powell's *New Machiavelli* and you are confronted by perspectives as reliable as witness statements in a Kurosawa film. Appropriately enough, we also have a TV drama, *The Deal*, whose own version of reality was a contested political weapon (Brown was allegedly delighted by *The Deal's* version of events). The bare facts are clear, but the interpretations, motivations, and consequences are entirely different. Whose account can we trust?

Steve Richards brings two important attributes to the task of defining Gordon Brown's role in our recent past. First, he is willing to listen sympathetically to anyone, and so extracts insights from the greyest of politicians and advisers. We find Stephen Byers dreaming of a shoot-out in a multi-story car park, David Miliband cavorting on a dance floor, and a Brown adviser slipping out of the campaign to re-elect a Labour government to brief that the defenestration of the Prime Minister will begin immediately the votes are counted. These insights illustrate an all too rare understanding of why politicians act the way they do, and of the forces they find themselves operating under.

Perhaps because of this natural empathy, the second tool Richards brings to the subject of high politics under New Labour (advice from the style guide: capitalise where the organisation capitalises itself – New Labour was nothing if not emphatic) is belief in the importance of sorting policy wheat from gossip chaff. Richards's contention is that although the personal dramas of Labour's leaders are significant, too often they are used to conceal the underlying political debate which drives the conflicts. So, while *Whatever It Takes* follows Andrew Rawnsley in being a treasure trove of anecdotes about the attitudes and behaviours of leading politicians, it aspires to something more. Richards wants to advance a thesis.

Briefly put, the case is this: Gordon Brown represented a subtly different political philosophy to Tony Blair, a step to the left of Blair's rootless analysis of society. In opposition and as Chancellor, Brown's philosophical differentiation and personal ambition combined to drive the poisonous atmosphere which existed at the top of the Blair government, but it also drove the core redistributive agenda of the government. Richards does not gloss over Brown's behaviour, but places it in the context of a man attempting to achieve something politically significant: social democracy by stealth.

However, when he became Prime Minister, Brown was trapped by his own inability to assert a social democratic philosophy openly. This leads to an appropriate paradox. Richards seeks to set out the centrality of political philosophy to Gordon Brown's career. In the first, pre-prime ministerial section of the book, the constant theme is Brown's attempts to limit the market-friendly instincts of Blair, while seeking to operate a market-friendly policy and to succeed Blair. But in the second half of the book, covering Brown at the centre of power, such battles are almost entirely absent. Instead of the defining purpose triumphant and central, we find a fascinating account of the struggle of the Brown camp with encroaching crisis. The grand philosophical agenda shrinks to almost nothing, replaced by who briefed about who, who hated who, and who got the blame for what. Only when hit by a global financial crisis was Brown free to do 'whatever it takes'.

On this reading, *Whatever It Takes* is a multi-layered title, referring to Brown's personal ambition, his overwhelming desire to see Labour in government, and his attempt to quietly implement a radical agenda – and also a critique of his failure to consistently do the same as Prime Minister.

Richards's book is insightful about how Brown came to this impasse, and about how Brown's insecurities played out in office. Only indirectly do Richards's own views impose themselves. At one point the authorial voice breaks in to declare that we, the voters, are at fault for New Labour's failures and insecurities, because in foolishly allowing the Conservatives to win the 1992 general election, we created a fearful, nervous disposition at the top of the Labour Party. Another authorial tic is adjectival. Blair and the Blairites are first 'rootless' and 'shallow', then 'messianic' (four times in as many pages) and 'evangelical', yet always 'graceful'. Brown is 'insecure' and 'childish', 'ambiguous' and 'evasive', but consistently 'purposeful'.

Ultimately, Richards's thesis is personal, not philosophical. It is Brown himself, insecure after surviving two decades of Labour defeats, addicted to the strategic ambiguity that characterised his politics as Chancellor, acutely nervous of the conservatism of the English electorate, who is at fault for the failure of the Brown agenda.

As Prime Minister, Brown's aides urge him to be bolder, to go further, to push his social democratic instincts further, but aside from the brief moment of liberation due to global crisis, he is fatally compromised. Like the fictional George Jones in David Hare's play *Absence of War*, when he most needs to find his voice, Brown discovers that the years of caution and compromise have stolen it. Hare asked: 'if a man makes this pact, if he smothers his real character, the passion of his character, how and when may he ever break out?' (Hare, 1994). Gordon Brown provided the answer. Too late, in a speech to London Citizens a few days before an election he had already lost.

If only New Labour had not been so afraid, if only Labour could have been more confident in office, if only Brown could have put his social democratic instincts before the

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electorate, then Labour might still prosper in office, or at least have achieved more before defeat. It's a beguiling argument, and, counter-intuitively, the examples of Brown's personal flaws that litter the text provide support for the thesis. To make the case that a broadly social democratic strategy could have worked under a different approach, Richards even tells us that 'Barack was a Brownite', which feels like something of a stretch.

Yet would 'Brownism without the flaws of Brown' really have succeeded as a political strategy? Could it even have existed without Brown's brilliant, flawed political skills? Brown, social democratic instincts intact despite the shattering defeats of the Thatcher era, sought to do whatever it took to win. Shackled, even eclipsed, by a leader whose agenda was more confidently individualist, he succeeded for his party. Given the spotlight, he discovered that a political strategy based on a fundamental evasiveness about your central purpose is ultimately doomed.

Nor is it perhaps as simple as 'Brown left and purposeful, Blair right and aimless'. After all, as Richards points out, when Brown was Chancellor, it was Tony Blair who lightly pledged to abolish child poverty and increase health spending to the European average, two commitments bigger and bolder than any Brown ever made in office. Nor did Brown unpick Blair's reforms of the public services, or his crime agenda.

Richards tells us that Brown did have a plan to break with New Labour, but wanted to win a general election before doing so. That feels suspiciously like an excuse. An election fought on a centrist manifesto wouldn't justify a noticeably left-of-centre government. Isn't it just as likely that while Brown's belief in quiet redistribution was heartfelt, Brown was also correct to believe it did not represent a broad enough political vision to win a general election and sustain a government?

Richards's sympathetic account argues persuasively that Brown adopted a strategy of social democracy by stealth because he believed it was the only way to deliver his agenda. The question of whether Brown was right or if, as Richards suggests, it was a tragic failure of political courage is likely to be the ground over which Labour's recovery is fought. For exposing that essential debate, Richards deserves the rewards of a dozen Rawnsleys.

Hopi Sen was a low level Labour apparatchik while the events described by Steve Richards took place. Despite being a full time political operative, he had only the haziest outline of what was happening at the top of his party. This may say something about him, about the real significance of high level politics, or both. Either way, he's quite glad he wasn't involved, as it seems to have been annoying and frustrating for all who were.

Reference

Hare, D. (1994) 'Absence of warts', *The Independent* 20.1.1994.