

THE Brown inheritance

What will UK politics be like in the post-Blair era? **Patrick Dunleavy** considers some scenarios.

For the crown prince in history, waiting is the hardest part. Gordon Brown's long service as principal rival to Tony Blair's leadership of the UK's Labour party looks set to culminate in an almost unchallenged coronation as Labour leader this summer.

He will then have completed more than a decade in office as chancellor of the exchequer, a record with no modern parallel, and he will be certain of at least two more years as premier before a general election in 2009. If that in turn was to go very well, his premiership would stretch to at least six or seven years in all, leaving him bestriding British political history as a modern colossus. If political conditions look bleak in 2009, Brown might hang on until 2010 with his political options closing around him, and unless something turned up in the interim he would leave office never having won a general election. For a politician who has brooded and planned so long to enter 10 Downing Street, the differences between these scenarios will matter intensely.

Securing the leadership succession may look almost done and dusted, but the political conditions of Brown's inheritance are not favourable. The 2005 general election left Labour with a comfortable majority of seats on the basis of a slender 35 per cent of votes (and 21 per cent active support from the electorate) only because of the UK's increasingly disproportional electoral system. For instance, Labour was gifted with 95 more seats than the Tories in England, even though the Conservatives got more votes in England than Labour. Political science simulations show that the 2009 election will create the best conditions for a hung Parliament that have existed at any general election since 1945. Current polls too place the Conservatives an average of eight per cent ahead of Labour, enough to make them the largest party on around 310 seats to Labour's 270. But the Tories would still require support from the Liberal Democrats (with around 45 seats) in order to pass the Commons majority level (of 324 seats) and form a government secure from defeats.

The Conservatives' lead reflects the growing popularity of their leader David Cameron's determined effort to move them towards the political centre ground, and to cast off the party's past reputation as antagonistic to many social groups in modern Britain. A gifted public relations executive, Cameron has mostly drawn a veil over his own privileged Etonian background and managed to come across as an accessible, relaxed family man who cares about green issues and has

a socially liberal outlook. Aware of the timetable that stretches to 2009 he has kept new substantive policy announcements to a minimum so far, working away instead on his own (still shaky) public persona and on repositioning the Conservatives as solidly committed to maintaining public spending on healthcare and education. Cameron's centrist push has been remarkable for its reach and sustained character, and so far the Tory right wing have seemed like rabbits dazzled in the headlights, with scarcely a peep of visible opposition.

Dazed by four successive defeats, the Conservatives seem to have become a party that now desperately wants to win and will bear almost any ideological sacrifice to get back in the game. The new leader has also modernised the Tories' candidate list with younger and more somewhat diverse people, especially more women. And he has changed his party's logo from the quasi-fascist Union Jack torch symbol of the Thatcher years to a modernist squiggle supposed to represent a green oak tree – a change that also implicitly emphasises the party's Englishness against Brown's Scottish background.

For Brown, who sits for the obscure Scottish seat of Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, this is the one aspect of his image and policy position that he cannot alter. Nor can he disguise the prominence of many Scottish MPs in the Labour party's commanding heights and the Cabinet. English resentment at the current devolution arrangements, where Scottish MPs can vote on English healthcare and education while the Westminster Parliament cannot discuss how these matters are run in Scotland (or Wales), has been slow to find political expression. But with Brown as prime minister the issue will only grow in salience.

Brown's personal popularity has plunged by a quarter since the end of 2006, just as his accession to the premiership seems imminent, perhaps because he has also made unpopular commitments. So far, too, the polls suggest that he will be an electoral disadvantage to Labour, although Brownites claim that he will gain a honeymoon effect on becoming leader. He could then sustain an upturn by appointing a new, much younger Cabinet and replacing some of the most conspicuously failing Blairite policies with new initiatives.

The contents of Brown's 'succession plan', nursed by Wilf Stephenson of the Smith Institute, remain closely guarded but may not be very radical in the economic or social policy areas that Brown has already dominated for so long. The plan may include some radical initiatives to focus central government initiatives on top level policy making, conceding more powers to the National Health

Service and local government in England, and to London's regional government and Scotland and Wales. The Westminster conventional wisdom has it that Brown needs both to combat his image as a remorseless centraliser and control freak and to grapple with constitutional issues that he has always steered well clear of, in order to show that he is genuinely a prime minister and not just a loyal bean-counting adjutant promoted above his station for long service. Reforming the House of Lords to become wholly or 80 per cent elected will also form part of this area, although Labour may need to fight a general election on this plank before it can persuade the current all appointed peers to vote for their own demise.

The other part of Brown's pitch to appear as his own man will be foreign affairs, where many in the Labour party are looking for an early withdrawal of British troops from Iraq and an end to the damaging troop losses and apparently directionless (Foreign Legion style) campaigning in Afghanistan. Here, however, Brown has so far given no signs of deviating from Blair's slavish backing for US policy. He may be calculating that nothing much can be achieved before the advent of a new US president (or at least the hot part of the presidential election campaign) in 2008. Brown has close links to many US policy makers, both Democrat and Republican, and is highly unlikely to jeopardise what remaining mileage there is in the 'special relationship'. Nor has Brown shown any signs of warming to the European Union, despite

the UK's steady domestic remodelling as a more and more typical European country in social and economic terms, which his own stewardship of economic affairs has greatly encouraged. For instance, several waves of in-migration from east European countries have underpinned some of the UK's recent economic growth.

Whether Tony Blair's departure and these small steering changes will be enough to placate and re-attract the millions of Labour voters disillusioned by the Iraq war remains to be seen. Both Brown's and Cameron's tasks here will be complicated by the fact that the UK is now a firmly multi-party country. At first past the post general elections the smaller parties are massively discriminated against, but there were also important proportional elections in Scotland and Wales in May 2007 and will be in London in May 2008. Here other parties present a real challenge to the big three (Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats). Nationalist parties do well in Scotland and Wales; two more left wing parties erode Labour's support, the Greens and the anti-war Respect party; and two right wing parties are eating into Cameron's support, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) campaigning for withdrawal from the EU and the British National Party (BNP) exploiting anti-immigration sentiment.

For Brown, who skilfully masterminded Labour's two successful election campaigns in 1997 and 2001, steering a successful course to June 2009 is not impossible. For instance, if even a small chunk of right wing voters was to support UKIP

or the BNP instead of the Conservatives at the general election, Labour could still win.

Both Cameron and Brown have also a great deal at stake in attracting the second preferences of Liberal Democrat voters in the many seats where their party cannot realistically hope to win. In 1997 Blair did a deal on constitutional reform with the Liberal Democrats that was decisive in winning the election for Labour. Yet in 2009 the third party's price for cooperation (before or after the election) might be high – nothing less than proportional representation elections for the House of Commons, finishing off the UK's half completed journey to becoming a normal European liberal democracy. ■



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