

I Disown this Government

Bryan Gould

Bryan Gould was Member of Parliament for Southampton Test during the 1970s, and subsequently for Dagenham from 1983 to 1994, when he resigned and returned to New Zealand to become Vice-Chancellor of Waikato University. In 1992, John Smith had defeated him in the contest for the Labour Party leadership. This article was published in The Guardian in February 2009.

Those, like me (and almost everyone I know in the Labour Party), who have been critical over the years of New Labour and its record in government might have expected that the passage of time would bring with it a kinder judgment. And in my case, in particular, it might have been thought that – twelve thousand miles away – distance would lend enchantment.

How, then, to explain that the more we take the long view of the Blair and now the Brown government, the sharper seem the contours of its failures and betrayals? How is it that the features of its landscape that grow – as our perspective lengthens – in shocking, anger-making prominence are those shameful episodes at home and abroad which cumulatively are a complete denial of what a Labour government (or any British government) should have been about?

There have been, of course, many good and decent day-by-day achievements of this government. Across the whole range of political issues, I do not say that Britain did not do better under Labour than it would have done under most alternatives. But these achievements have been molehills, judged against the towering peaks scaled by New Labour in its rejection not only of Labour, but also of any decent and civilised values.

The first – and for that reason perhaps most unexpected – contravention of civilised norms was the Iraq war. The damning judgment of that doomed enterprise has been repeatedly rehearsed, but to read the charge sheet again is still a shocking experience. A British Prime Minister, claiming the right to moral

leadership and an almost religious duty to confront evil, sucked up to a soon-to-be discredited US President, and helped to launch an invasion of a distant country – an invasion based upon a lie, and one that flew in the face of international law, undermined the United Nations, alienated the whole of the Muslim world, seemed to validate the claims of terrorists and those who recruited them, destroyed the country that was invaded and killed hundreds of thousands of its citizens, took many young soldiers to unnecessary deaths, and rightly reduced Britain's standing in the world.

The New Labour government still refuses to acknowledge that any of this was wrong. It will not even countenance an independent inquiry into how such a fatal mistake was made.

It may seem improbable that the scale of the Iraq calamity could be matched in any other area of government. Yet, as the reasons for and scale of the global recession become clear, it is also increasingly apparent that another global (as well as British) disaster can be laid – substantially, if only partly – at the door of the New Labour government.

It was, after all, that government which enthusiastically endorsed the virtues of the 'free' market, which turned its back on the need for regulation, which celebrated the excesses of the City, which proclaimed that it was 'intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich'. The government that should have protected the interests of ordinary people was dazzled by the super-rich; unsuspecting Labour supporters found themselves thrown on the tender mercies of a market-place that was cleared of any limits that might have restricted the rich and powerful. There have been no more enthusiastic cheer-leaders for the culture of greed and excess than New Labour ministers.

On the central issue of politics – the willingness of government to use its democratic legitimacy to intervene in the market in order to restrain its excesses – the New Labour government ensured that the dice lay where they fell, and applauded as they did. It was Tony Blair who, standing shoulder to shoulder with Rupert Murdoch, proclaimed that the future lay with the 'globalisers', and that those who wanted to reclaim some control over their lives were 'isolationists, nationalists and nativists'. It was Gordon Brown who removed the major economic decisions from democratic control, and handed them over to unaccountable bankers.

That betrayal of those who looked to a Labour government to help them has seen a rapid widening of inequality and a sharp intensification of social disintegration. It is the jobs, homes and lives of ordinary people that have borne the brunt. The country is a weaker and poorer place as a result.

But even that failure pales by comparison with the latest revelations

about the abandonment by New Labour of any pretence to civilised standards. We now know that this government connived with the Bush administration to hold people illegally, to kidnap them in secret, and to torture them while in custody – all in the name of a war against the forces of darkness. The perpetrators of these outrages seem to believe that they can be washed clean by simply declaring their superior morality.

Nothing more clearly distinguishes those beyond the pale than their willingness to use the secret, illegal and cowardly infliction of pain to terrify, cow and bend to their will helpless people being held without charge or trial or legal redress. It beggars belief that any British government could, in a supposed democracy, do so, and not even bother to respond to its critics. It is simply incredible that a Labour government, claiming to represent the values of the Labour movement, could believe in these circumstances that it has any right to remain in office.

For me, this is too much. I am sick to the stomach. I disown this so-called Labour government. I protest.

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