

Beans.

The long kiss goodbye

The Downing Street door has nearly closed on Tony Blair. Martin Amis has been shadowing the prime minister on his farewell tour, watching him preen in Belfast, share bonbons with the Bush administration - and get it badly wrong in Basra. And all the while the Iraq protesters are hovering ...

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Saturday June 2, 2007

Guardian

No 1, London

It isn't bad, driving through town with Tony. The car's steel cladding, as the PM points out, is almost comically thick - so thick, indeed, that the interior has the feel of something like a Ford Fiesta rather than a Jaguar; and it takes nearly all your strength to tug shut the slab-like door behind you. But then we're away. The crouched policemen, in their Day-Glo yellow strip, buzz past like purposeful hornets to liberate the road ahead. We barely brake once between Downing Street and the Westway. The power is ebbing from him now; but for a little while longer we can luxuriate in the present tense. And, yes, it's a bit of all right, driving through town with Tony.

The best moment comes as we approach Hyde Park Corner. Instead of toiling around it, like all the other fools and losers, we sail across it, diagonally, and then curve right past that far from unfashionable address - No 1, London.

Now I notice that the PM wears no seatbelt. When I tenderly point this out to him, he gives an unemphatic shrug. He is, he says, "embarrassed by the bikes". I am wondering if that's why Tony looks so young - 10 years without any traffic. But it wasn't always like this. The police escort, like so much else, is a consequence of September 11.

Edinburgh

We were at the Corn Exchange, where Tony would soon denounce the Scots Nats. During the pre-speech lull he strolled over and said, "I had a shock this morning."

Yes, I thought: I bet. I should just about say you did have a shock this morning. There it was on the front page of the Independent: the shadowy photograph (making him look haunted, hunted - isolated, above all) and the banner headline, BLAIRAQ. "An exclusive poll reveals that 69% of Britons believe that, when he leaves office, his enduring legacy will be ... " But it was, of course, laughably inexperienced of me to think that this was the shock Tony hoped to discuss. He's not about to raise the subject. Everyone else on earth can be relied upon to do that. It is impossible to exaggerate it: the white-lipped and bloody-minded persistence of the question of Iraq.

"I went on GMTV," he continued, moving his head about stiffly in mock indignation, "and Kate Moss's models were on it, too. Five or six of them. And all of them amazingly beautiful."

"Wearing?"

"Not much. They were about six foot three. In incredibly short skirts. And someone said, 'Did you notice how short their skirts were?' And I said, 'No! No!'"

"Bit early in the day," grumbled a journalist.

"No," said the PM, "it wasn't too early in the day. It never is too early in the day."

That morning, after a long speech (and Q and A) on the NHS, and then the appearance on GMTV, Tony showed up for a raucous bash at Labour HQ - and it was still barely 8.30am. Disco music on the turquoise boombox! The coffees! The teas! That exclusive Independent poll also revealed, much more quietly, that 61% of Britons believe Blair to have been a good PM, including 89% of Labour supporters. This was evident. The warm-up act came courtesy of Old Labour, in the person of that battered sensualist John Prescott ("a decade of delivery!"); then the crowd, gurgling with adoration, feasted its senses on the PM.

The one-floor offices are a further concretisation of what Blair has done for the party. Until 1995, Labour was stationed in Walworth Road, SW17, a facility described at the time as "crap" by Blair and as "fuck-awful" by Alastair Campbell. From the old HQ - remote, poky, dank with lumpen defeat - the foot soldiers got their upgrade: to Millbank Tower, just across the river from Parliament. Then came the mighty computer, "Excalibur", primed for light-speed rebuttal of all Tory boasts and smears. The symbolism was unambiguous: here was electoral modernity, and the party machine.

Blair "chose" Labour, but reinvented himself as its antithesis. A mutant: something like a middle-class German-American Christian Democrat. Compared with him, Gordon Brown is all fish and chips and Woodbine. But the apparatchiks loves him: he is their redeemer, their awakener, their landslider.

At the Point Conference Centre in Edinburgh, during another lull, Tony strolled over once again and said, "What have you been up to today?"

"I've been feeling protective of my prime minister, since you ask." For some reason our acquaintanceship, at least on my part, is becoming mildly but deplorably flirtatious. "You've had reverses in the midterms before. And in the European parliament. But this will probably be your first ... rejection."

"This won't be my first rejection. 2003."

"And Cheriegate? That was bullshit, right?"

"Oh, complete bullshit. But what about you?" he typically asks. "If your books get attacked, you don't let it throw you."

The PM had earlier confessed that it wasn't just the miniskirts that gave him a turn on GMTV. There was also the contrast between his face on the monitor and all that bright and breezy footage from 1997: "The ageing process on screen," he said. It wasn't a before-and-after such as Abe Lincoln's - the handsome frontiersman completely desiccated by the Civil War. Whatever way you look at it, though, 10 years is a long time in politics.

"There's also an ageing process within," I said. "You don't get tougher. You get tenderer. And certain phrases come into your head. Like life's work." Yes, or like legacy. "But you've got steel. Like your car."

"Mm. Armour-plated."

The Den

Number 10, broad, tall and deep, has the appearance of a country hotel, with the furnishings of a Harley Street waiting room; and there is a mid-stairs feel to it. You go past the discreetly burping doorman, and for every striding or trotting secretary ("Is the PM still in his office?"), for every spin doctor and dreamily cruising technocrat, there's a bloke trundling past with a trash barrel or a porter's trolley.

You feel at once that the atmosphere is also palpably genial and tolerant and quasi-egalitarian. "Tony," a staffer told me, "is a great non-belittler." Downing Street, after all, is presided over by a man who answers to a diminutive. This may have been notionally true under Ted Heath and Jim Callaghan, but not under (say) Dai Lloyd George, Andy Bonar Law, Stan Baldwin, Nev Chamberlain, Winnie Churchill, Hal Wilson or, for that matter, Tony Eden.

The Tony administration, some say, deploys a "sofa style" of governance: the normal channels of influence are largely bypassed, and the PM relies on his inner circle of brainstormers and media-wise myrmidons. In May/June 1997 it was decided that the regulation of interest rates should become the responsibility of the Bank of England; when Tony was advised that such a momentous change should be discussed with Cabinet, he said, "Oh, they won't mind. We'll ring round."

Today I was allowed into the Den to witness "Denocracy" in action. The subject was climate change and exploratory talks on the creation of a "carbon market". Tony listened to six or seven voices ("Those two are still slagging each other off... Chancellor Merkel wants a deal ... The meeting with the Indians was positive ... The Japanese was extremely touchy ... The American was extremely difficult"), before weighing in with his conclusion: "We need to make it clear what it means for American business - that they won't leach contracts to the Chinese. I will work it through with him. With Bush."

Then it was upstairs to the White Room for a podcast with Bob Geldof on Africa - Africa, a quarter-century compulsion of Bob's and a solid 10-year enthusiasm of Tony's. Then it was downstairs to the long table and a multinational convocation of bishops. Power has been described as a drug, an aphrodisiac, a "filthy venom" (in the words of Maxim Gorky); it is also, for much of the time, carcinogenically boring. Like all politicians, Tony has seven or eight kinds of smile. Smiles two and three would do for the bishops. When he is making the rounds of a crowded room, his smile, towards the end, is a rictus, and his eyes are as hard as jewels.

All the boredom is what the world doesn't see - the hidden, humble toil of dosing and humouring, of giving face and jollyng along. It is this that keeps politics halfway honest, and impedes the process that Bob Geldof alluded to, up in the White Room: "It's a bit naff, isn't it? What happened? The politicisation of celebrity or the celebritisation of politics?" And the question arose: what will Tony be when he quits? An ex-politician?

"No," he said. "I'll be a former celebrity."

Belfast

From George Best City Airport to Stormont. And the Castle is a thrillingly emotive sight on this day - the great dripping edifice of intransigence. Within, Blair knocked off some interviews before the historic addresses in the Great Hall. And I spent the time trying to parse the anarchy of his accent, a dog's breakfast of Durham, public school Edinburgh, Australia (years one to four) and estuary Essex. "Wanted" is wantud and "destructive" is destructuv. The terminal t is regularly swallowed ("It's nok clear") and there is a candid glottal stop in his wha'ever. Blair was reminiscing about his childhood holidays in Donegal and his first "half" of Guinuss when, ineluctably, the interviewer said, "One last question, Prime Minister. This is a huge achievement, but it seems your main legacy will be ..." And Blair's blue eyes minutely flinch, and seem to cancel themselves.

I watched the swearing-in at the Assembly by TV link, and it was something to see. The old zealot, Paisley, still cake-in-the-rain handsome in his 82nd year, and the affectless Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein, a ringer for Conrad's Professor, the meagre megalomaniac in *The Secret Agent*, whose "thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction". But there we had it, the convergence of the twain, in an atmosphere of long-compressed agitation and near-hilarity, the hilarity of the unreal. It was almost a Mexican wave.

Meanwhile, outside, a reminder of local concerns: NO SHRINE AT THE MAZE and JUSTICE FOR PROTESTANTS. But the big banner, and all the energy, proclaimed: BLAIR LEGACY 60,000 DEAD IN IRAQ. And at the next stop, a courtesy call at the venerable daily the News Letter, there was a raggedly thrashing figure on the street with a policeman sitting on it and a police dog barking at it, and BLIAR. WANTED. WAR CRIMINAL.

We are witnesses to the triumphal speeches and we hear the applause, but we don't usually see the moments of fierce political relish, the deep and durable gloat of vindication: I was right all along! At another castle, Hillsborough (the Queen's Belfast bolthole), there was one such, when Blair had a quiet half-hour with the tottering Teddy Kennedy and the redoubtable Peter Hain. History - the remorseless unforeseen - had for once in its life colluded with their desire, and it was all very understated, the tacit satisfaction, all very hushed and husky and hard-won.

Kennedy said that he had been involved in the process since Bloody Sunday in 1972 (Blair's gap year: he was a velvet-looned Bee Gee with a guitar called Clarence). Thirteen died on Bloody Sunday; and the toll for the whole

period stands at about 3,500 - or the equivalent of one bad month in Iraq. Later, in Basra, Blair would tell the troops that the struggle they were engaged in was "infinitely more important than Northern Ireland", for the simple reason that it would shape "the future of the world".

On the plane, in a brief audience with the PM, I said that the events of the day were of course exhilarating but also intimidating. How long does it take to evolve from terror to politics? Could he imagine, in the Iraqi parliament of the future, the ghosts of Muqtada al-Sadr and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi gazing at each other with smiling eyes?

"It must happen," he said. "Something like that must eventually happen."

Washington

"Sit Room" is not an American contraction along the lines of fry pan, sleep pill or shave cream. Far from being the sitting room, the Sit Room is the Situation Room where, this morning, Bush and Blair and Condi and Cheney are having a video teleconference with their commanders and ambassadors in Iraq. Any moment now, there will be an elaborately staged, side-by-side, shoulder-to-shoulder double-premier advance to the Oval Office for talks, with other participants, about Africa, Iran and "energy security". The atmosphere in these corridors, the aides, the secret servicemen, the odd wandering pol with hair as rigid as caramel or marzipan, doesn't remind you of anything else. A futuristic academy, perhaps, of pure power.

The style is not prime ministerial but presidential: at every moment the office itself is honoured and exalted. You get a sense of it at the gate on Pennsylvania Avenue where, with your press cards (plural), your staff pin and your photo ID, you confront the scowling, head-shaking jacks-in-office - incarnations of disgusted scepticism. Inside, the whole place fizzles with zero tolerance, with the prideful tension of high protocol. Its peculiarly American flavour is evident in the sustained choreography and the dread of the spontaneous. This does remind you of something: a film set. After prodigious delays and innumerable false alarms, and bungled rehearsals (with stand-ins), Harrison Ford and Jeremy Irons give us their 15 seconds, then it's back to the delays and the false alarms and the bungled rehearsals.

Pretty well everyone, from the semi-literate windbags of the blogosphere ("So! The poddle of Downing Street once again hear's his masters whissel") to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia (who has started defying the Americans because he "doesn't want to be known as the Arab Tony Blair"): pretty well everyone agrees that the PM has vitiated his premiership by sticking too close to George Bush - an association described as "tragic" by Neil Kinnock and as "abominable" by Jimmy Carter. And Blair himself, I thought, was arrestingly forthright when he said, in a recent interview on NBC, that "at one level ... it is the job of the British prime minister to get on with the American president". This is a tradition that goes back, with certain fluctuations, to Churchill and the termination of Britain's imperial weight. One should not pretend it is a frictionless business, saying no to America. It is one thing to be "a leading member of the EU". It is quite another to be what Clinton called "the world's indispensable nation".

I was given a clandestine glimpse of this disparity in the Roosevelt Room, while chewing on a bonbon graciously offered me by a passing Karl Rove ("I think we need some glucose here"), and waiting for Harrison and Jeremy to make their next move. A few prime ministerial staffers were comparing notes with a presidential equivalent on the question of foreign travel. When Blair goes somewhere, he relies on a staff of 30 (and five bodyguards). When Bush goes somewhere, he relies on a staff of 800 (and 100 bodyguards); if he visits two countries on the same trip, the figure is 1,600; three countries, and the figure is 2,400. At the other end, Blair will settle for whatever transport is made available. Using freight aircraft, Bush takes along his own limousine, his own back-up limousine, his own refuelling trucks and his own helicopters. "Mm," murmured a chastened Brit. "You make our lives seem very simple." This was, shall we say, the diplomatic way of putting it.

Bush and Blair exchanged their political farewells at a press conference in the Rose Garden. The president, by now, fancies himself as a great wit (among other things), having spent six years surrounded by people who double up at his feeblest crack. But it has to be said that Bush was at his very best that day, generous and affectionate, and quick to acknowledge the political pain he had inflicted on his (necessarily) junior partner. Then, too, there were the coded salutes to Blaieran "influence" in his mention of global warming ("a serious issue") and his tolerant reference to the two-state solution in the Middle East.

The PM, for his part, gave a passionate restatement of his crystallised rationale: after September 11, the west

had no choice but to unite against a planetary enemy; and he did what he did because he believed it was right. While the two men spoke, you could hear the distant bawling of the protesters on Pennsylvania Avenue. It was as if an incensed but microscopic goblin was off in the bushes somewhere, down by the ornamental lake, his voice strained to the maximum yet barely louder than the endless miaows of the cameras.

After a celebratory session at the British Embassy (Northern Ireland), we were given the full totalitarian motorcade from Massachusetts Avenue to Andrews Air Force Base. At every crossroads, junction and side turning there was a squad car keeping the lid on a half-mile Tony tailback. And on we sped - our limousines, our Rolls-Royce, our Swat truck - across the flyover above a Beltway shorn of all traffic, and on to the tarmac from where our plane would take us, via Heathrow, to Kuwait.

Iraq

My support for the war, nonexistent until it actually began, received no noticeable fillip as I donned my 10-kilo combat vest and flak helmet, and trudged up into the rump of the Hercules C-130.

I had earlier been roused by a 4.30am wake-up call, and then extracted a) two bottles of water from a minibar childishly infested with 7Up and Orangina, and b) a full toilet roll from the adjacent bathroom (what I really wanted was a Depend undergarment). My breakfast, too, was untypically light on the All-Bran and black coffee. We advanced to the airport through the almost artistic cheerlessness of Kuwait City - a conurbation seemingly put together without a woman's touch, its only colours commercial, its only curves devotional, under a sinister mist of damp dust.

The interior of the Hercules was without surfaces; it was all innards - sacking, wiring, tubing, webbing. DANGER, WARNING, EMERGENCY GROUND AND DITCH. A soldier hollered out our survival instructions, not a word of which I caught, and of course there were no tranquil updates from the captain, and no accessible portholes, so the only progress reports were acoustical: fantastic snortings and screechings.

Tony rode in the cockpit, and spiffily disembarked, at Baghdad International, in suit and tie. At no point, so far as I saw, did he encumber himself with the neck-ricking headgear or the snarling Velcro of the flak jacket. And I remembered that first journey when, in rather more agreeable surroundings, he disdained the use of the seatbelt in his armour-plated Jag. What is this prime ministerial trait? The rest of us, by this stage, were carapaced in sweat and grit. But Tony crossed the runway like a true exceptionalist - one of the chosen, the saved, the elect.

Needless to say, there would be no eye-catching motorcade for "the Highway of Death" to Baghdad. Tony climbed into his helicopter; I climbed into another and watched, with fatalistic detachment, as the tawny teenager fed the cartridge belt into the tripod-mounted machine gun. We steered low, just above the telegraph wires. At this height (I was told), no missile would have time to arm itself before impact. The helicopter would take the hit, but it wouldn't actually explode. We also fired off flares as we flew, so that the more credulous projectiles would seek their heat rather than ours. If you closed your eyes you could hear music, military but atonal, like tinnitus.

Mortar fire had just savaged a Toyota Land Cruiser in the parking lot of the British Embassy, our first stop in the Green Zone. While Tony took his rictus from face to face, I got talking to Jackie, a member of the managerial staff. "Every day now we have an incoming," she said. "If you're inside, you're all right, and if you're outside there are these duck-and-cover units. They're like boxes, and you're supposed to scrabble into them when you hear the five-second warning. It's the hot metal - the shrapnel. For five or six weeks we've been getting it. You don't bother if you've got a clean white skirt on."

We bustled on, to a press conference at "the Palace", or the prime minister's residence: heavy sofas, gilt-trimmed chandeliers, artificial roses, artificial light. Al-Maliki shuffled along the damp red carpet to greet and kiss President Talabani, and they disappeared behind the stockade of TV cameras. There were hostile questions, and you could hear Blair's weak protesting treble and Talabani's didactic baritone: progress, improvement, the Iraqi security forces, the dialogue with the tribes, the channel to Iran, constructive talks, the way forward ...

We shunted on to Maude House, HQ of the British Support Unit, just in time for another alert. The other guest of honour, General David Petraeus - soon to deliver his ominous, all-deciding verdict on the Surge - barely blinked as the sirens squawked.

"It's Apocalypse Now meets Disneyland": this was the twinkly verdict of a British staff colonel. And there came an interlude, on the helipad (like a drained swimming pool of grey concrete, the size of a city block), where you could find some shade and try to bring order to the tangle of miserable impressions. The Green Zone resembles the embassy district of a minor South American capital after a period of immiseration and collapse, where the powers that be are exhaustedly girding themselves for the chaos and carnage of revolution. I found myself staring at a discarded ornamental armchair (its symbolism all too cooperative), which grimly presided over a heap of rubbish. Then it was wheels up and we clattered over Baghdad, the apartment blocks like little low-rise car parks, with trash everywhere, and green-mantled standing pools.

Something happened to Blair in Basra - at the airport base, which is pretty well all that's left of the operation in the south, the city having been abandoned to the general atomisation: Shia factions, tribal militias, armed gangs. There had been several hundred handshakes in the Coffee Bar (the old VIP room), and several hundred 10-second conversations; there had been a reasonably good speech, reasonably well received. Blair then repaired to a side room, for a closed session with the padre, several officers and about 25 young soldiers. And something happened.

There was talk from the senior men about "the hard and dark side" of recent events at the camp (losses of life and limb), about transformative experiences, about the way "these young people have had to grow up very quickly". And when it came to Blair, all the oxygen went out of him. It wasn't just that he seemed acutely underbriefed (on munitions, projects, tactics). He was quite unable to find weight of voice, to find decorum, the appropriate words for the appropriate mood. "So we kill more of them than they kill us ... You're getting back out there and after them. It's brilliant, actually ..." The PM, it has to be said, appeared to be the least articulate man in the room. The least articulate - and also the youngest

I stayed on after the PM took his leave. Two minutes later there was a room-jarring whump. "Sit on the floor, everyone," said the officer. As we hunkered down, the corporal I was talking to, without a second's pause (so routine was the interruption), went on telling me about the firepower of the Tomahawk anti-tank guided missile. I said goodbye, after the all-clear, to those earnestly frowning faces, and our party filed out, leaving them there in a desert both spiritual and actual, under the thick, dirty-white medium of sand and dust, like soiled medical gauze.

Person to person

"This is Downing Street and there's nobody home," runs the joke. "Please leave a message after the high moral tone." The high moral tone - such an infuriant to his detractors - is not something that Blair has co-opted. Like his religion, it is entirely innate: if that wasn't there, nothing else would be there. He has been called a Manichee, seeing only light and darkness; and he has been called an antinomian, a self-angeliser who holds that what he does is right by virtue of the fact that he does it. This is the mechanism Blair is reduced to, I think, in his rationale for Iraq. The forces of darkness are arrayed against the forces of light; and we cannot afford to lose. Both propositions, in my opinion, are perfectly true. We cannot afford to lose, but lose it we will, in this theatre of the coalition's choosing.

I had an hour on Iraq, person to person. Except at odd moments, though, you never are one-on-one with Tony Blair. There is always the photographer, the documentarist, the aide with the tape recorder. There is also the professionalised super-ego of the PM, schooled in caution, incessantly aware that his airiest word can double back on him and loom like a Saturn. It is not the case, as the dulled phrase has it, that what you see is what you get: he is more physically impressive, more sensitive and much more playful than the man on your TV screen. But it remains true, with Blair, that what you hear is what you hear.

"Have you seen The Queen?" I asked him. We were flying to Germany on one of the old, slow Hawker-Siddeleys, borrowed from the royal fleet. She's the head of state, remember, and just completing her 11th term.

"Uh - no."

Well, I said, it's a case of everyone getting everything wrong. Helen Mirren is as usual a joy to watch. But she's a hopeless Elizabeth. All that wryness and irony. I've met the Queen, for about 10 seconds, and she's a heifer. Don't you think?

"I'm not going along with that," he said, twisting in his seat.

"But you, you. The actor gets you to the life. The sheen of youth. The sheen of power. What's it like, power? Is it heady?"

Yes, he said, but you're steadied by the responsibility. I like to think I can do without it. You have to be able to risk it, and leave some room for instinctive judgment. You have to face the possibility of losing it. In order to use it.

"So how does it feel," I said, much later, in the den at Downing Street, "now that it's ebbing from you?"

"All right so far. When the day comes, I'll probably be clinging to the doorknocker, but so far I think I can just ... let it go."

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