

BROWN and the New British

By Matthias Matthijs

Political transitions from one leader to the next are said to be rarely smooth. If that is the case, then the much-anticipated handover of keys at 10 Downing Street from Tony Blair to Gordon Brown in late June was the exception rather than the rule. Brown has decisively taken charge of the Whitehall political machine, even though his first few months in office have hardly been without drama and serious tests. Failed terrorist plots in London and Glasgow, severe floods in the Midlands, new outbreaks of bovine foot and mouth disease and the ongoing credit crunch resulting in the Bank of England bailout of mortgage lender Northern Rock were hardly a dream start. But so far Brown seems to have weathered every storm with astonishing ease, even when the media and opposition vilified him after he “lost his nerve” and “bottled” the anticipated early election.

In fact, for all the excitement of a “snap” general election in autumn 2007 or spring 2008, it always was hard to imagine that the stoic and calculating Scot would throw the electoral dice. Even though many Labour members of Parliament actively encouraged speculation of an early election in September, Brown, increasingly worried about the narrowing gap with the Conservatives, in the end decided not to gamble—after all, one of his first decisions was to abolish Blair’s super-casinos. Even though David Cameron has managed to bring an end to the “Brown Bounce,” the Tories are still far from challenging the Labour Party and replacing their continuing hegemony.

Since Blair has left the scene, Brown—the longest-serving chancellor of the Exchequer since the 1820s, is by far the most commanding political figure in Britain and the only real heavyweight in Westminster. Although he may lack Blair’s charisma and swiftness, he has played up his seriousness and substance. The current Labour campaign in the United Kingdom tries to exploit this overall impression: “No Flash, Just Gordon.” Furthermore, after the resignation of Sir Menzies Campbell, the Liberal Democrats are yet again searching for a leader and, compared with David Cameron, Brown faces very little opposition from within his own party rank and file. Britain’s new prime minister

seems keen on getting on with the business of government and implementing his distinct “vision” for the country.

Blair’s Foreign Policy Legacy

Although Brown has tried to draw a clear line under the Blair years, there are many enduring continuities with his predecessor’s legacy. Nowhere is that more clear than in foreign policy: The melody might be different, but the lyrics are the same. However, for a man known to be a strong Atlanticist (his vacations on Cape Cod and admiration for the strength and dynamism of the American economy are well reported) and a fervent “Euro-skeptic” (he kept Britain out of the euro zone and is notorious for sermonizing his European Union colleagues on the benefits of a U.K.-style flexible market economy), he has displayed a remarkable coolness toward the George W. Bush administration and instead has tried to foster closer relationships with the Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy governments in Germany and France. His first foreign meetings were in Paris and Berlin, where all leaders seemed to find more common ground than did their respective predecessors. During Brown’s first visit to Camp David in July, there was a marked contrast between the chinos-wearing Blair and the suit-and-tie-clad Brown, with his much more businesslike approach to U.S.-U.K. relations.

Brown clearly recognizes the bitter divisions caused by Blair’s controver-



Diplomacy

sial decision to follow Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney into Iraq, but he has made it clear that Britain will not shirk its “international responsibilities.” Here the decision to renew Britain’s nuclear-deterrent Trident missile is crucial, since it strategically binds the United Kingdom to the United States for the next 40 years. And it is hard to see Brown embracing the Franco-German process of European integration or declaring himself *un homme d’Europe* in front of the French assembly in Paris, as a young Blair did 10 years ago.

That does not mean, however, that the White House can breathe entirely easily. In a speech in Washington, D.C., Douglas Alexander, a Brown confidant and Britain’s new development secretary, spoke about the benefits of multilateralism and international law, comments that largely were interpreted as criticizing America’s unilateral approach to world affairs. More poignantly, the appointment of Lord Malloch-Brown—the veteran U.N. diplomat who was a prominent critic of the war in Iraq—as a minister in the Foreign Office also signaled a more impartial approach to foreign policy based on coalitions that stretch beyond the normal partners. The prime minister is unlikely to be “joined at the hip” with Bush, Malloch-Brown has been quoted as saying. It was probably naive to think Brown would spend a lot of political capital getting close to an unpopular, lame-duck U.S. president. The hope in Downing Street is that the new U.S. president—Democrat or Republican—will be more in tune on pressing issues such as climate change and international development.

So what can we expect of U.K. foreign policy in the near future? As it stands, there are five pressing short-term issues on the table: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the ratification of the EU’s new “Reform Treaty.” Obviously, the first four are closely interlinked, and success or failure in one of the four will affect progress in the others. Longer-term issues include global warming, United Nations reform, the fight against poverty and the accommodation of a rising China and India in the international system. Because significant steps forward on the longer-term issues are unlikely until the swearing in of a new U.S. president in 2009, this article focuses on the short-term foreign policy challenges that face British diplomacy.

The Iraq Dilemma

First, when it comes to Iraq, Brown faces a fundamental dilemma. He seems keen to get British troops completely out of the Iraq quagmire but without reneging on his country’s international obligations or causing a major spasm in the relationship with the United States. Although Brown and his youthful foreign secretary, David Miliband, publicly supported Blair’s decision to invade Iraq, both are rumored to have had private reservations about the endeavor from the outset. The withdrawal of 5,500 British soldiers from Basra to a single base near the city’s airport makes it painfully clear that they were unable to quell the bitter struggle between rival Shia groups in southern Iraq. Most likely, Brown will seek a gradual and orderly withdrawal from Basra. The quid pro quo, many analysts believe, will be to send reinforcements to the British contingent in the war in Afghanistan.

The rationale for sending part of the British contingent in Iraq to Helmand province in southern Afghanistan—the Taliban’s stronghold—is compelling. First and foremost, Brown wants

to reinforce the public perception that Iraq belongs to George W. Bush and the departed Tony Blair. Transferring troops from what many saw as an illegal war to one with strong international support seems smart. Second, Afghanistan is viewed by many as a key test case for the effectiveness of NATO and the Atlantic Alliance. If Brown wants to avoid getting pulled into a more “European” defense structure, he has a lot at stake with NATO’s success in Afghanistan. Third, in military terms, the British army seems overstretched and unable to fight two wars on two fronts. The 7,000 troops in southern Afghanistan could use the reinforcements sooner rather than later. And finally, from a domestic point of view, the link between Islamist extremism in that part of the world and terrorism in Britain is much more obvious. As Miliband has pointed out, most of the recent terror plots in London can be traced “to the Pashtun tribal lands that stretch between Pakistan and Afghanistan.”

On Iran, the Brown administration is likely to continue its tough stance on Tehran’s nuclear ambitions. Only 10 days into his new job, Miliband insisted the Iranian regime did “not have the right to set off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.” Arguing that a nuclear Iran would undermine the stability of its neighbors, Britain will press hard for a third United Nations resolution to further tighten sanctions on the country. Even though Miliband refused to take the military option off the table, it is a stretch to imagine Gordon Brown following the United States into a military adventure in Iran. The lesson Brown has drawn from the Iraq debacle is not to slavishly adhere to Washington’s most controversial policies, especially if they invoke hostility at home. In the case of a military strike on Iran, Brown is more likely to follow his Labour predecessor Harold Wilson’s policy in Vietnam: strong verbal and diplomatic support, but not one cent or one soldier. Also, unlike Blair on Iraq, Brown is more likely to coordinate his Iran policy with his European partners in Paris and Berlin, who share the same multilateral approach.

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Brown also seems closer to the long-standing policy of his European counter-

parts in a more solid commitment to the plight of the Palestinians compared to Washington’s much closer ties to Israel. Of course, a lot will depend on whether all the goodwill and promise of the November Annapolis peace talks can be translated into a sustainable peace settlement by the end of 2008. Right now, the focus is on Hamas and the international community’s demand that it recognize Israel’s right to exist before engagement occurs. There are signs that Brown will emphasize development of the Palestinian economy; he asked his closest political ally Ed Balls to draft a report on the economic aspects of peace in the region. The report, which highlighted the extent to which Israel’s multiple restrictions on movement are damaging Palestinian economic development, could function as a useful starting point. However, with Tony Blair holding the top job in this area as the International Quartet’s Middle East envoy, it remains to be seen whether and how the former prime minister will influence his successor on Middle East policy.

Ties With Europe

Finally, the latest draft of the European Constitutional Treaty, agreed to in Germany and signed in Portugal—now mostly referred to as Europe’s “Reform Treaty”—is bound to cause headaches for Brown. Even though the situation in Europe has changed—the return of economic growth and new leadership in France and Germany—“Euroskepticism” rides higher tides in Britain than ever. The Conservative opposition together with the right-wing press already has called for a referendum on the new treaty. Brown will want to avoid such a losing battle at all costs. By arguing that the new treaty has abandoned the grand pretensions of its predecessors and pointing out Britain’s hard fought opt-outs in the most contentious areas such as social and judicial policy, Brown insists that the new treaty is “qualitatively” different from the one rejected by French and Dutch voters in 2005. Since the new treaty basically sums up what was already there and is designed to make the Brussels “Eurocracy” more

efficient, he sees no need for a referendum. And Brown has a point. The new European treaty hardly goes as far as the Single European Act of 1986 or the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, both of which were approved by simple parliamentary majorities in Westminster.

While the “coronation” of Brown as British prime minister has created a significant change of tone, there will be broad continuity with the Blair era in foreign affairs, with the continuation of Trident as its most important symbol. In an interesting twist, however, Brown and fellow newcomer Sarkozy seem to have drawn opposite lessons. While Brown is seeking to distance himself from the United States and forging close relationships with Europe, Sarkozy seems to nurture a much closer relationship with Washington than did his predecessor, while at the same time stepping up his criticism of all things

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European. It is likely that Brown is hoping to bring the “special relationship” with the United States back to the equilibrium of the Margaret Thatcher era.

In the end, we need to be cautious when predicting what a Brown foreign policy will look like over the next couple of years. Who would have predicted in 1997 Blair’s taking his country into four wars—Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq—and his reluctant approach toward further European integration? It is useful to keep in mind what Harold Macmillan answered when he was asked in the late 1950s what the main factors were that would determine his foreign policy: “Events, dear boy, events.” ■

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