



My 'Dodgy Dossier'; How Alastair Campbell helped me get a quotation from Tony Blair

by Patrick Wright

'You can stress the community of the nation state without diminishing your internationalism'. I was, I suppose, quite pleased to have elicited that statement from Tony Blair. Yet I was also troubled. I had been invited to quote those words as Tony's heartfelt own yet I had never met the man, never written to him, and never talked to him on the phone either.

It was in the autumn of 1995, shortly after the party conferences in which patriotism had been such a pronounced theme. Still in power but already adrift on a rising tide of 'Sleaze', the Tories had resorted to the last refuge of scoundrels with unusual gusto. For John Gummer, who was Secretary of State for the Environment, patriotism was a rural theme: he deplored liberal incomers who tried to 'ban cockerels from farms' and hoped that the Tory impulse would not be further 'clouded by urban thinking'. Then in his notoriously 'Latin American' phase, Defence secretary Michael Portillo blasted great clouds of Europhobic vapour over the assembled party loyalists, vowing that he would never surrender 'our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen' to faceless functionaries in Brussels who would probably oblige them to undergo paternity leave. There was even a fringe meeting entitled 'the German enemy'.

Meanwhile, Tony Blair had called for a 'new British' patriotism at the Labour Party conference a week or so earlier. This was plainly going to be a big theme over the months to come, and I wanted to hear more about it, and how it differed from the last-ditch nationalism of the Tories. So I phoned the Labour Party.

I was hoping to talk with Blair himself, but I started with his press secretary, Alastair Campbell. When I explained that I intended to write an article on New Labour patriotism, he asked me to fax him through a description of the issues I would like to address.

I did as requested and, on phoning back, found Campbell himself willing to expound on my questions. He had helped write Blair's conference speech: prompted in part, as he explained, by Labour Party research demonstrating that what voters wanted out of politics could not be reduced to the money in their pockets. They also talked a lot about Britain, worrying about decline in standards and feeling 'a real sense of shame' over, for example, English football hooliganism in Europe. He also expressed the view that Tory patriotism was often a kind of theft: wrapping your cause in the flag and then

suggesting that everyone else is just running the country down. This sort of behaviour was, he said, 'sickening and nauseating. . . We have got to stop thinking that patriotic feeling is somehow inherently Conservative.'

Campbell told me that Blair's cultivation of a 'new patriotism' had been spurred by something that happened on the fiftieth anniversary of VJ Day, a few weeks earlier in mid-August. After the celebrations (which were as spectacular in Britain as they were modest in America, restrained by the memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), Blair and a number of Tory ministers had walked back down the Mall to their various cars, and people along the way had shouted at him to get stuck in and kick out the Tories, deriding the latter as imposters in their easily assumed patriotism. As Campbell recalled, Blair came back in some amazement, telling his colleagues they wouldn't believe what had just happened.

Campbell was known for 'spin' even then, but it really didn't seem to be just a superficial process of 'rebranding Britain' that he had in mind. Contemptuous of those who decried all patriotism as reactionary, he wanted a version that would be democratic, as much urban as rural, inclusive rather than exclusive, forward rather than backward-looking. He didn't want to invoke 'crude nationalism' or appeal, even indirectly, to chauvinism, yet he knew that Labour was unlikely to win by projecting Britain only as the 'hybridised' or 'mongrel' nation advocated in a recent Demos pamphlet. Better, as we concluded, to connect your patriotism to a rediscovery of society and the virtues of social democratic citizenship.

I thought our conversation was going pretty well. So I came to the point. Could I now continue this discussion with Tony Blair? The moment of silence that followed was not filled with the sound of fingers redirecting my call, or of feet carrying the phone into an inner sanctum. Instead, Campbell guided me to a place in the note I had faxed through outlining my questions, and told me I could start there.

I was a bit slow on the uptake, but I eventually realised he had just dropped a quotation mark into one of my hastily improvised sentences. He then counted his way through thirteen words of my text and, with the confidence of a man who had a whole tub of the things, unloaded another one. Having rounded off the statement and checked that I understood precisely what he intended those quotation marks to contain, he concluded 'You can have that from Tony'.

So there it was. 'You can stress the community of the nation state without diminishing your internationalism.' It wasn't a bad statement of ambition, and it still seems to capture some of the promise with which Labour swept to power less than two years later. Perhaps Campbell generated such 'quotations' every day. Perhaps Tony Blair would have found himself in sincere rather than calculated agreement with the statement anyway. But I still felt uneasy as I typed the words into my article. I remember worrying

that they might even be picked up by a diligent historian, and placed on the record as a direct expression of the spirit in which New Labour set out to rejuvenate the country. Fortunately nothing like that ever happened. Tony, Alastair and me – we all stayed innocent that time, thanks to the *Guardian*, which spiked my article. I was irritated for a while, but I now feel relieved that my own dodgy dossier on New Labour patriotism never saw the light of day.

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