

Duncan: Brown a blast from the past but Cameron is the future.

Just over ten years ago, on 17 March 1997, the Conservative Party published a pamphlet I had written called 'Beware Blair'. Despite gargantuan efforts to seek extensive coverage, it was published on the same day that John Major decided to announce the date of the general election and so it became one of the most ignored documents in British political history.

In preparing for tonight I was acutely aware that history might repeat itself and that I would be overshadowed today by Tony Blair announcing his intention to step down. I sense that I have just managed to slip in under the wire.

In that book, however, I gave my assessment of what I thought were his dominant qualities:

'The first is a seemingly insatiable vanity, touching on vainglory. The second is a simplistic evangelism of the sort that believes that wanting a better world constitutes a serious policy. The third is a ruthlessness which is deployed only for power but never for principle. This is a potent cocktail for tragedy.'

As the hand of destiny now glides towards his shoulder, there is an army (perhaps more of a posse) of commentators ready to pass judgment on his decade in office, and so I will resist the temptation to do so myself tonight, except to say that he has been a communications phenomenon and that any Prime Minister deserves our respect both for the office they hold and the person they are.

Last week's local election results, however, show the depths of unpopularity to which Blair and the Labour Party have fallen since their dizzy endorsement in 1997. A party that can only attract 27 percent of the popular vote is clearly one that has lost trust. Tell me about it, you might say! One of the big questions hanging over Labour's imminent succession now is whether it will ever be able to restore it.

Aware of this, not to say somewhat anxious about it, Gordon Brown has promised a new start - a radical reshaping of the way that the Labour Party governs the country. The truth, however, is that as much as Brown may pretend to be a new start, the public increasingly realises that in taking all the decisions which have led to the falling away of public trust in the New Labour project Brown has been at Blair's side throughout.

In fact, he has been its principal architect. Tony has been the front man: Gordon has been the director. The two have been together in New Labour from the start, when they even (more happily than now) shared an office in Parliament.

Over the last ten years Blair has performed across the world stage, but the detail of everything he has promised has come from Gordon Brown. Most of what is being discussed as Blair's legacy is actually the work of Gordon Brown. Brown has in fact been more engaged with the Blair government than Blair often has himself.

But from now on Brown can no longer hide behind the front man.

When it comes to some of the most damaging decisions that affect the Government's reputation it is Brown, and not Blair, who has been most responsible.

It was Brown who raided the pension funds and cut their value by £100 billion and more. It was Brown who levied a massive £50 billion tax increase on British businesses. It is Brown who has doubled the council tax. It is Brown who has given us the longest tax code in the world. And it is under Brown's stewardship that Britain has dropped from fourth to tenth in the international competitiveness league.

It is Brown who, three times now, has fiddled the terms of the Golden Rule and used the PFI scheme to hide tens of billions of debt off balance sheet.

And it is Brown who during the relative prosperity of a decade has taxed us by stealth and put nothing away for a rainy day.

Prudence, his great amorata, used to be an attractive proposition: but sadly prudence has become a bit of a slut.

The crucial truth, which people can see, is that however hard Brown might try to portray himself as a fresh start, he isn't. He can take over in June, but he isn't a fresh start: he's the blast from the past.

He cannot dissociate himself from Labour's record: he is the record. Every imaginable aspect of the last ten years in government has had to pass through his all-controlling hands. But it is not just policy and performance which he will have to answer for. It is also the way he practises his politics.

Brown likes to portray himself as the serious half of the Blair-Brown partnership. But the reality is that he is the original propagandist in the relationship. He likes to suggest that his arrival as PM will see the restoration of serious politics, but this claim is itself a nugget of propaganda.

From the very beginning New Labour was about spin. It is in their DNA, and it is more important to them than truth, principle or justice.

Philip Gould (*The Unfinished Revolution*, p.200) talks about Blair, on the day after John Smith's death, leaving behind any principles he had. His candour is instructive.

Nobody can fail to admire their skill, but it is not one we should admire. They legislate for gesture, not for justice. The soundbite matters more than sound reasoning. Politics, for Labour, has been more about technique than conviction. This more than so much else has caused them to be discredited.

Labour now complain about the media and public cynicism, but I think it is fair for us to state bluntly both that it is they who created it through their media manipulation in the 1990s, and that at the heart of it all Gordon Brown has been its principal architect. Tony's been a great actor: Gordon has been the playwright and director.

The trouble for us is that it worked with TB: the trouble for them is that it won't work with GB. TB has had a remarkable gift for communicating with the concerns of middle Britain, but it is a skill which GB simply does not have. With the front man gone, No10 is about to be occupied by the wrong end of the pantomime horse.

The Brown camp's attempt to hide his lack of natural empathetic skills by cooking up a new politics of straightforwardness and seriousness is deliciously unconvincing.

Jeff Randall, of the Daily Telegraph got it right when he said of the latest budget: *"He polishes his numbers like a second-hand car dealer buffs up an old banger. Gordon Brown's skill is to make all those facts and figures look good. The trouble is, the shine only lasts five minutes. On close scrutiny, the product invariably falls short of the salesman's patter."*

The problem from now on for him is that the scrutiny at the top will be greater than ever, and its intense focus will concentrate as much on the past as the present, and he will not be able to escape and deny his total involvement. He is in it, right up to his brass neck.

I'm sorry if some think I am being cruel, but so far I have only been kind. If you really want nastiness we are going to get it from Brown in spades. We have tried to put an end to Punch & Judy politics. Under the Brown bludgeon it will be all punch.

People can sense this in him. There is something about Gordon Brown which inflames my indignation, and I am not alone.

Perhaps the greatest tribute that opponents can pay to Tony Blair, because of his natural touch, is that we had to force ourselves to dislike him: in contrast perhaps, the greatest threat to Gordon Brown is that such people do not feel the same such need.

One of the things that Gordon Brown talks a lot about is meritocracy. I wish he understood its true meaning and did not poach the language for a distorted purpose. His prescriptions are not about merit: they are actually about equalisation as dictated from the centre.

In implementing his objectives, Gordon Brown has become the high priest of the target culture, and that culture is fundamentally illiberal and inflexible.

Whenever one of his many weighty reports tells him that the evidence is that such-and-such a policy would be good for this proportion of families or that proportion of the unemployed, he goes and does it. He doesn't stop to think whether there is a better approach. And so he ignores the idea that instead of compulsion and proscriptive targets, politicians have the power to educate and inform. He doesn't trust people, so he is not willing to let them take decisions affecting their own lives. He thinks he knows best. So he will never learn that instead of legislation and forcing, he could do more good by widening choice and providing the education to back up those choices.

Whereas Blair had some important liberal instincts, Brown does not. With Brown we are back to the bossy arrogance in which the man in Whitehall really thinks he does know best.

Take childcare - Gordon Brown thinks it is a good thing, so his approach is to give a credit to parents when they put their kids with a registered childminder. But he doesn't extend that credit to grandparents or other family members. Nor does he give it to parents who choose to look after children themselves. He does not give families the tools to make choices for themselves. He thinks that he knows best and he is happy to impose his views on the rest of us.

And as all of us who represent constituents know, and as the Select Committee Report has reinforced today, his theory of tax credits has not worked in practice. I am enraged by the nastiness of a powerful Chancellor who boasts about his system of poverty reduction yet so many people of scant means have been paid from that system only then to receive a massive clawback bill from a callous government which viciously condemns them to years of repayment misery when it is not their fault. This is unjust and unfair.

When will he learn that, in practice, his philosophy just doesn't work? After ten years, people have sensed this.

And their perception coincides with the swing of the political pendulum. At last some might say. When it comes to the battle lines for the next election, the mood has changed. Jim Callaghan spotted the phenomenon. The tide eventually turns. So far that change only amounts to a flow and not a flood, but Labour would be unwise to gloat. We still have a long way to go, but the change is material, and it gives the Conservative Party essential room for movement.

For too long now Conservatives have allowed Labour to set the agenda. Using relentless propaganda they have twisted our positions to make us look bad.

But at last, under David Cameron, we have changed and we are now seen differently. They are looking tired and we are looking fresh. People are beginning to listen to what we have to say and they are finding that we speak plain honest sense.

Poverty is a good example of Labour's propaganda. Gordon Brown talks a lot about poverty and they have made some progress. But for the money they have spent the results should have been better. We must not allow Labour to represent themselves as the only party interested in tackling poverty. Conservatives in previous generations have done as much as any party to tackle poverty and we are focusing on this challenge again.

An issue like poverty-reduction lies at the heart of the new distinction that is emerging between us and Labour. As Tony Blair prepares to leave the political stage and we look back at his record and compare it with his predecessors we can see British politics in perspective.

We can take post-war Britain, decade by decade, and get a feel for the priorities that dominated its politics. In the 1970s and 1980s they were primarily economic. But as Oliver Letwin argued yesterday they are now predominantly social.

David Cameron has articulated the overriding attitude that must shape all our politics now, in that whereas the main challenge for a government used to be how to tackle economic breakdown, the challenge now is how to tackle social breakdown. After ten years of a Labour government, it is Conservatives who understand this, and we are about to have a new Prime Minister who refuses to admit that his methods of addressing that breakdown have dismally failed.

Whereas we believe in addressing social breakdown by appreciating that individuals and local decision-making can do far more than centrally-directed programmes, Labour do not.

One of the reasons so many government initiatives are failing is that the culture of spin and its surly exercise from the Treasury has seriously poisoned the apparatus of government.

Democracy itself is suffering.

Just this week I read a poll which said that politicians are the least trusted people, with more people placing their faith in car salesmen. Fifteen per cent trusted politicians in 2002. Now, 7 per cent trust them, with 8 per cent trusting car salesmen.

One of the reasons for this is that politics in the UK is saturated. There are politicians everywhere yet Parliament, which should matter most, has been made puny. To most, our political structures have become incomprehensible.

There are more tiers of government than I can count on my hand, yet most people do not know what they do or what they are accountable for. On top of the councils that we know about, this government has created regional assemblies - which no one wants and which no one votes for.

At each tier the structures are different and voting systems are numerous and complex. We have just seen the humiliation that can cause. We are no longer equipped to give the rest of the world a master class in democracy.

People feel that they are distanced from politicians.

Voter apathy is a symptom of the way in which politics has become increasingly about spin and media management and less about really caring about people's needs and being straightforward and frank with people.

Our democracy has been corrupted by this government's contempt for the House of Commons. Laws are forced through without debate; questions aren't answered; statements are designed for headlines first.

The next decade will demand extraordinary courage and vision from our politicians. Tackling social breakdown at home while facing the forces (and opportunities) of globalisation abroad, will require strong leadership.

But can democracy respond positively to long-term challenges, or will it only make decisions for the short-term?

I see these as huge challenges, yet I am optimistic about democracy's resilience. People may be taken in for a bit, but in the end they invariably see through any veneer, however shiny.

And this is the story of New Labour. They have been brilliantly clever to last ten years, but all governments and all politicians have a shelf life. Ten years at the top is normally the maximum people will stand for. After that, your past keeps on catching up with you and people's affections wane and look elsewhere. They are looking now.

And as they look, and size up us politicians, we are about to embark on a new political era. Tomorrow, Tony Blair will announce his resignation as Leader of the Labour Party, and the starting gun will have been fired to pick his successor. We all know it will be Gordon Brown.

He will succeed just as the country has tired of the New Labour project. Despite a clear message in the local elections last week, voters are not yet ecstatic about us, but they are increasingly supportive. Gordon Brown's approach to politics is looking tarnished, resentment for his stealth taxes and centralised bossiness is growing, and the Liberal Democrats are in decline.

David Cameron has excited a whole new generation of voter, and the priorities he has set, and the approach he has defined, are resonating with the country.

But - mark my words - do not be so foolish as to underestimate Gordon Brown. He will prove to be a formidable opponent. The great surly clunking fist will be no pushover.

On the wall of his office in the Treasury he has a calendar; it is a chart of his first 100 hours and then 100 days and what he will do with them.

He has been thinking about what he is going to do over those first 100 days for years, probably since the leadership of the party was taken away from him in the Granita restaurant in Islington in 1994.

When he assumes office at the end of June he will be a whirling dervish. His first few days and weeks will be feverish. There will be frenetic activity as departments are re-shaped, people appointed (and no doubt disappointed) initiatives launch. All the techniques he has deployed for so long will be put into overdrive. The boss of so much in the past will be the boss of the whole lot at last.

So, be warned - fasten your seat belts! There is no doubt that as he rolls into party conference on his chariot and claims to have cleansed his party with puritanical bleach he will enjoy a new-found, almost unimaginable, popularity. He will bounce up, and the bounce will be unsettling.

We can see this coming, and we will not be sucked into Mr Brown's vortex. We should accept that for a few months the sheer novelty of his becoming Prime Minister will dominate the news and force us temporarily to one side. We should keep our nerve, not panic, and use the time to continue to define the direction we want to set for us and for the country. We should use the time to outline and explain the framework into which our policies will later fit.

While we advocate a Britain that is more green, more local and more family-friendly, we will see the new Prime Minister continue to bark orders and pull levers from the centre.

In the midst of the inevitable flurry of early euphoria for Gordon Brown we should keep our cool. Most elections are a fight between the party of the future and the party of the past.

I am confident that we are the future now. However hard he tries, Gordon Brown cannot escape the fact that he is the man of the past.

There might be some new tricks in the old dog yet: but he remains an old dog. A new dog he most certainly ain't.