

# The Ups and Downs of Gordon Brown

by Richard Peel



In his article in *mægə'zi:n 02/07* Øivind Bratberg examined the relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, what each meant for the Labour party, and what each wanted the Labour government to do. In this article the focus is on Brown's fortunes since he took office as prime minister.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown delivers his speech at the Labour Party Conference in September 2008 (©Scanpix)

On 27 June 2007 Tony Blair resigned as prime minister and Gordon Brown took his place. It was common knowledge that in Brown's eyes Blair had overstayed his welcome. Indeed, opinion polls published three days later suggested that the voters agreed. Labour's popularity had been slipping badly under Blair, and the Conservatives had edged into a lead in opinion polls. But on 30 June, just a few days after Brown took office, Labour recorded a 4% lead in several polls, and the press were talking of a "Brown bounce" and of the "Brown factor" reviving a lagging party.

However, not everyone in the Labour party was enthusiastic about him. The year before Blair stepped down, when he announced to the party's annual conference in Manchester in 2006 that this would be his last conference as party leader, several Labour MPs looked around for a cabinet minister who could persuasively challenge Brown to the leadership of the party.

No one of substance came forward. The party seemed in awe of the agreement between Blair and Brown – made, according to "the ballad of the Granita restaurant", at a restaurant in Islington way back in 1994, soon after John Smith's sudden death – that Brown would stand back and not challenge Blair's bid to become leader. The understanding was, so the story goes, that after x or y years as prime minister Blair would in turn step down and make way for Brown.

To start with, all went well for Brown. Two small-scale crises occurred that gave him the chance to show that here indeed was a pair of steady hands. The first was a double-terrorist scare: two car-bombs were found parked in London, and the terminal building Glasgow airport was hit by a burning car driven by terrorists. A second more protracted crisis occurred when severe flooding struck parts of central England. Brown and his ministerial

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A closed branch of Halifax Bank of Scotland (HBOS) is pictured in Birkenhead in north-west England, on October 15, 2008 (©Scanpix)

team acquitted themselves well, overseeing quick and effective responses to both crises. The floods even persuaded some sceptics that Brown's well-known concern about climate change was perhaps relevant to everyday politics after all. With encouraging poll results coming in, Brown and his supporters felt good. Perhaps a fourth-in-a-row election victory was feasible after all, in spite of the unpopularity of the Iraq war, and the inevitable feeling many voters had that a change is a good thing after any party has been in power for over eleven years.

Now we push the fast forward button to summer 2008. The political situation had been transformed. At the beginning of May in local elections in England and Wales the Labour party lost a total of 331 council seats, winning only 25% of the vote, against 26% voting for Liberal Democrat candidates, and 44% voting for Conservatives. Turnout was low, this itself quite likely being an expression of displeasure with the party in power in Westminster. Labour's discomfort was compounded when the incumbent mayor of London, Ken Livingstone – a maverick character, but firmly the Labour candidate – was defeated in the mayoral election by Conservative Boris Johnson. In the context of national politics, the election to the job of mayor of London is of minimal importance, but for a few days it captured the headlines and revealed and advertised Labour's unpopularity.

Worse was to come. On 22 May there was a by-election in Crewe and Nantwich, a constituency in north-western England, where the Conservatives won an overwhelming

victory, receiving just under 50% of votes, with Labour receiving 30.6%, the Liberal Democrats 14.6% and other parties 5.3%. This was a mighty swing away from Labour which, if translated into a general election, would sweep the Conservatives back to power on a wave as triumphant as Blair's had been in 1997. Staggeringly, it was the Conservatives' first by-election gain since 1982. "This is the end of New Labour!" bellowed David Cameron, Conservative Leader, his arms raised alongside the victorious candidate, Edward Timpson.

Opinion polls in July and through the summer to September reiterated the message. Brown's government had become deeply unpopular. David Cameron (for he was the beneficiary – the Liberal Democrats failed to cash in on the decline in support for Labour) sensed that he would be the clear winner in the next general election, which has to be held before 5 May 2010. *The Observer*, a left-of-centre newspaper, not predisposed to be scathing of Labour, commented on 21 September in its leading article:

**Voters are already deeply hostile to Mr Brown ... On its present trajectory, Labour will emerge from the next election with 160 seats, fewer than they won under Michael Foot in 1983 ... Those who plan to vote Conservative are firmer in their resolve than those who might back the government. Things could still get worse for Labour.**

Needless to say, Labour MPs and party supporters were deeply worried. They asked,

and we must ask, what had gone wrong. Why had the Brown bounce of the previous summer collapsed so completely?

One reason is that Brown became a ditherer. He dithered about a possible election in 2007. When the media started asking whether, in the late summer of that year, when things were still looking good, he would call a snap election (as a prime minister can at any time), Brown made only one thing clear, and that was that he could not make up his mind. A brave politician would either have called the election instantaneously (no bad idea – to allow the electorate to give him their support, thus giving his premiership a huge dose of legitimacy) or have scotched the suggestion immediately.

Brown's whole style began to appear fussy and indecisive. He arrived in Lisbon for the signing of the Lisbon Treaty far too late. This was a prime minister, who can fly anywhere at any time! Most commentators saw this as an attempt to steer a middle line between travelling enthusiastically to Lisbon, thus antagonising euro-sceptics at home, and staying at home, thus antagonising EU leaders. Prime ministers, especially those who quote school mottos on taking office, should not be late for such important meetings.

Brown took a middle-of-the-way stance again and again. For example, during the controversy over the Olympic torch (on its way to a country that carries out the death penalty on a huge scale and allows few political liberties) he agreed to talk with the Dalai Lama in London, but not at 10 Downing Street. He dithered over



the 10 pence tax band which, in his last budget as chancellor of the exchequer, he had planned to abolish. Uncharacteristically he had got his sums wrong, because it became apparent that some groups of poorer families would be hard hit by this reform. There was a revolt among backbench Labour MPs. Later, Brown retreated, and amended his plan. All this and more suggested to the voters that the steady hand was not steady at all.

Prices were rising, not just on petrol (everyone knows that oil prices are outside a single government's control) but also on food. The Opposition was on the attack, and could easily find targets. "The legacy of Brown's failures," remarked the *Spectator* in May 2008, "can be seen by the inner city slums, sink schools and family breakdown all across Britain. His way doesn't work, and everyone now knows it." Cameron regularly got the better of Brown in the cut-and-thrust of prime minister's question time in the House of Commons.

Add to this cauldron of Labour discontent a Liberal Democrat party whose electoral strategy was switching from a focus on seats the Conservatives might lose to seats Labour might lose (thus splitting the left-of-centre vote) and we can sympathise with Labour MPs who began to see Brown as a liability. In the run-up to the party conference this year foreign minister David Milliband gave an incautious interview in which he implied he might challenge Brown. But polls said voters had no more confidence in other Labour ministers than in Brown.

Brown was probably tempted to resign, but wisely did not. He had somehow to claw his way back to earning that genuine enthusiasm many people had felt for him a year before. But how? First, Brown had to forget about trying to please everybody, and focus attention on the sensible reforms his government was making, such as reducing hospital waiting lists, lifting children out of poverty, renovating schools, imposing controls on school admissions to stop the drift towards a two-tier scenario of popular middle-class schools and unpopular working-class schools, and creating a fairer university entrance system, to mention some examples.

He put his act together at the annual party conference this summer. A weak performance would almost certainly have made the temptation among rebel MPs to call openly for his resignation irresistible. His speech was good. In British politics a party leader's speech to a party conference is extremely important. Brown spoke like the man in command. He apologised gracefully for failures, naming the confusion over the 10 pence tax band specifically. He listed Labour's

achievements. He ridiculed the Conservatives for opposing many of them. And all the time he was reminding his listeners of the approaching thunderbolt – the global financial crisis. "This is no time for a novice," he asserted. He did not name the two Davids, Cameron and Milliband, and did not need to. "Some say I'm too serious – I say there is much to be serious about." He was right, and the time had come for action.

Brown acted fast. He re-shuffled his cabinet, surprising everyone by appointing Peter Mandelson to a new inner cabinet group, what the *Guardian* newspaper called the "economic war council". The Tory press was cynical, seeing this as a panic measure from a doomed prime minister. Other newspapers were impressed. It was a risky move by Brown – Mandelson, after all, had resigned two cabinet posts already for using his connections to give advantages to buddies. True, in the second incident he had been proven innocent, but that he is accident-prone is beyond doubt. But the thing that really made the media buzz was that Mandelson and Brown had had a very strained relationship for many years, stemming from Mandelson's decision way back in 1994 to support Blair in the leadership stakes.

It was a risky and daring appointment. What did it indicate? Mandelson was an out-and-out Blairite. This is important, because the financial crisis that was now over-shadowing everything else on the political scene could be seen as giving an opening to the old left to re-establish control. Capitalism, one could argue, had failed, so let's get back to socialism. By choosing Mandelson to a key post, Brown made it clear what he thought of that argument. Mandelson's position was well-known, as this statement in an interview in the *New Statesman* in October made abundantly clear:

**When I listen to some of the trade union leaders and others who are organising hard on the left of the party, demanding renationalisation and an end to new Labour, sneering at the so-called Blairites, I realise there are still those who prefer the comfort of opposition to the hard tasks of government.**

Mandelson was not the only figure from the past invited to 10 Downing Street that week. The other was John Maynard Keynes, the economist called by Will Hutton in *The Observer* "the liberal who understood why free finance is capitalism's greatest enemy". Free finance had had quite a run. Brown, we should remember, as chancellor of the exchequer, had on frequent occasions praised the City and the world of high finance for its vision and enterprise, refusing to regulate it or oversee it with any thoroughness. It was a

paradox that this advocate of free-wheeling finance should now be called upon to rescue the country from the consequences of that very freedom and that very recklessness. The Tories, meanwhile, were check-mated, for they had been even more fulsome in extolling the virtues of unbridled capitalism. They are in a sense paralysed. Cameron has announced that he supports in broad outline Brown's measures. The Conservatives are in the same weak position with regard to Iraq, where they have also supported the government.

Brown turned to the standard Keynesian remedy of rejuvenating the economy by using public money – as a first step, rescuing threatened banks. To the delight of his supporters, he suddenly became something of an international star, winning praise from many leaders for his rescue package, and looking confident and purposeful at international meetings. But the impact of his package remains to be seen. What will happen when the recession starts hurting? A recession means loss of jobs and, usually, political unpopularity for those in power. This is Brown's gamble – that he will be rewarded for dealing with the crisis in a relatively swift and decisive way, not punished for its consequences.

While the eyes of the world were on the US election campaign in late October, nervous Labour eyes in Britain were on the upcoming by-election in Glenrothes on 6 November. This would be "a D-Day for Brown" in the words of the *Guardian's* Ian Macwhirter. Glenrothes is a constituency just north of Edinburgh and in fact adjacent to Brown's own constituency. Such is the significance of this by-election that Brown broke with Blair's tradition of not taking part in by-election campaigning. The contest was, in every commentator's view, a stern test of Brown's early-winter standing in Britain as a whole, and of the current balance of power in Scotland between Labour and the Scottish National Party. In 2005 Labour won 52% of the votes in Glenrothes, with the SNP second with 23%. However, most polls predicted and pundits reckoned the SNP would win the seat in the by-election.

In fact, they didn't. Labour held it with a fairly comfortable majority. There was, it is true, a 5% swing from Labour to the SNP, but this was nothing like the massive 22.5% swing from Labour to SNP recorded in the Glasgow East by-election in July. From July to November had been four crucial months in Brown's political fortunes. The Glenrothes result was a tremendous relief to Gordon Brown – evidence that he has indeed been granted a breathing-space. He undoubtedly enjoyed his breakfast on 7 November, but he knows he has tough times ahead.

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