

My political journey with nine prime ministers by Bill Wright

Over the course of my life I have not been much of a political animal at all. Finding enough money to pay the mortgage, feed my family and pay all the bills dominated my adult life for more than two decades. But I was always well aware of current events and political changes, hence these notes.

Thatcher

In 1976 I was old enough to remember a feeling of shock and humiliation when Denis Healey, the Labour Chancellor, had to beg £3.9 billion from the IMF like a vagrant kneeling on a street corner. It was a staggering sum at the time. Jim Callaghan had taken over as prime minister from Harold Wilson in the same year but that had made no difference. Britain was widely regarded as the 'sick man of Europe' and the 'British disease' described an addiction to strikes, industrial action and abysmal productivity. In an act of galactic stupidity, the Labour Government had nationalised so much during the 1970s, including the British car industry. The 1978/79 'winter of discontent' illustrated all that was wrong with British society.

Like 1940, the country needed a miracle, and quite astonishingly it got one in May 1979: Margaret Thatcher was returned as a Conservative Prime Minister with a working majority of 44 seats. My lefty maths teacher was horrified: 'she won't last 6 months' he declared. I did not share his view, and ten years later and after two further general election victories it was pretty clear most of the country did not agree either.

Thatcher was a completely different animal to the elitist bachelor, Ted Heath. Like Reform UK today she believed in the power of freedom and hard work, encouraging people from every background to work hard and make the most of the opportunities in their lives. For example, the Housing Act 1980 gave several million council house tenants the right to buy their house at a preferential price. In Norwich where I grew up, the positive social impact was incredible.

Other significant memories from that era include the 1982 Falklands war when to the horror of the TUC, unionised dockers worked quite literally around the clock in Portsmouth and Rosyth to prepare the naval taskforce for liberation.

Two years later Arthur Scargill and his NUM cronies did their level best to take down the elected Government in a politically motivated strike intended to starve the country of power and force the Government to negotiate surrender on NUM terms. As the grandson of a Nottingham miner I recognised the pivotal moment when every miner was denied a democratic strike vote by the NUM leadership. As a direct result the stubborn Notts miners remained at work and the strike failed.

For much of the 1980s Thatcher was opposed by Neil Kinnock which was a mis-matched contest to the point of regular humiliation in the Commons. A boxing ref would have stopped the fight very early on in the match. But to be fair to Kinnock he did start the process of stripping out the hard left factions from the Labour party which was to make Blair's 'New Labour' brand electable ten years later.

Major

One of several compelling reasons why I will never join the Conservative party is the way in which the cowardly men in suits disposed of Thatcher in 1990. Having won two further elections since 1979 (a whopping 144 seat majority in 1983 and a 102 seat majority in 1987) I believe she had definitely

earned the right to be judged by the British electorate not by vile Tory creatures like Heseltine, Howe and their ilk. But the iron lady was forced out and was replaced by the utterly uninspiring John Major.

Fortunately for him, Labour was still led by Neil Kinnock and in a surprise election result in 1992, Major was returned with a tiny majority of 21 seats. A far cry from Thatcher's electoral successes. I can still remember the front page of the Sun on voting day with the message 'If Kinnock wins today, will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights'. It was accompanied by the balding head of Kinnock squeezed inside a light bulb. That sentiment resonated with me and millions of others.

Major's administration was dogged by increasing euro-scepticism in the Tory ranks. A smarter guy would have recognised it for exactly what it was – reflecting the deep unease of the British population as a whole with the EU project, later defined as 'ever closer union' by the unelected elite in Brussels. But Major interpreted it as disloyalty and famously described some of his Cabinet colleagues as 'bastards' in 1993.

His administration, dogged by accusations of sleaze, staggered on in a pathetic fashion until 1997. Tony Blair had seized control of the Labour party in 1994 after the untimely death of John Smith and soon proved to be a very different political animal to Kinnock. The country felt ready for a change and Blair charged into Downing Street with a stonking 179 seat majority. But never with my vote. With master spin doctor Campbell forever in his shadow, Blair was basically a snake oil salesman; always has been, always will be.

Blair

Just like Thatcher, Blair won three consecutive general election victories. Fair play to him and all concerned with the successful if somewhat transient 'New Labour' brand. So how about recognising some positives? I can only think of two.

First and foremost, he managed to broker the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which brought an end to most of the violent 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. Much personal credit is due for that achievement.

And secondly in 2005, the Olympic committee (IOC) were deliberating in Singapore about the choice of venue for the 2012 games. It was widely accepted right across the World that it would be Paris, for so many compelling reasons. Well until Tony showed up with other ideas. He brought along a gang of diverse inner city school children to emphasise the dubious 'legacy' angle in favour of east London and personally lobbied about 40 IOC members. The rest is history. After the shock announcement that it would be London, watching the French faces was a priceless moment.

Sadly, negatives are easier to recall.

The Human Rights Act: this piece of nebulous legislation was an immediate priority for the incoming Labour Government and had Cherie Blair's grubby fingerprints all over it. The UK's reputation for human rights is pretty much second to none so why on Earth did we need to legislate? Inevitably the Act contained a plethora of moronic, subjective terms such as 'The Right to Life' or 'Your right to respect for private and family life'. It was a massive trough for human rights lawyers (including Cherie) and practically the only beneficiaries were vile foreign criminals seeking to evade deportation. Worse still, it incorporated all the rights set out in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into domestic British law. We are still dealing with the grim repercussions in 2023.

At the 1996 Labour Party conference, Blair stated that his three top priorities on coming to office were 'education, education, and education'. Very droll, I thought, but once in power this infantile wordplay was followed by the specific aspiration that 50% (!) of young people should attend university. I was working in higher education at the time and knew for a stone-cold fact that this was a catastrophic mistake that could have only one outcome. Academic standards would be dragged down into the dirt to the benefit of no one - except senior university staff on eye-watering salaries and pensions.

Thirdly, Blair was responsible for opening the floodgates on immigration. He and Campbell did nothing without a cold assessment of the political consequences. They were convinced that the vast majority of immigrants would vote Labour and very quickly incoming numbers rocketed into the hundreds of thousands per year. All in the name of diversity and multiculturalism.

Fourthly, I am sure you recall the events of 11 September 2001, unforgettable for all the wrong reasons. I remember that day vividly, and two thoughts have reverberated ever since. Firstly, what were the perpetrators trying to achieve, apart from expressing a satanic level of hatred against Americans? Secondly, and more worryingly, if they were prepared to fly civilian airliners into office buildings, is there anything at all they would not do? Apparently not. Which could well include detonating nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the centre of London. So when the United States decided to go to war with Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Blair decided the UK had no choice but to go along. There was just one small problem: *justification*. So the infamous 'dossier' was cooked up. It contained specific allegations that Iraq possessed 'weapons of mass destruction' (chemical, biological and nuclear). Without exception, all of the allegations included within the dossier were proven to be false. Blair's reaction? Let's move on, folks. Nothing to see here. Just several thousand dead Iraqis.

Postal voting: this is a personal bugbear of mine. In my mind, if you are physically able to walk to the pub, then you are equally capable of walking to the local polling station. End of discussion. Postal votes should be only for the infirm certified by their GP and a few special cases such as the armed forces and oil rig workers. But at the turn of the century, anecdotal evidence suggested that Labour voters were less likely to get out and vote, especially if the weather is inclement. Believing this, Blair acted decisively, and since 2001 it has been possible to get a postal vote *on demand* – no reason required. What is the big deal you might say? Why get all worked up? Well here is the big deal. If you have a postal vote, is there anything at all stopping you from signing and selling it? Or just handing it over to someone with influence over yourself?

Unlike Thatcher, Blair saw the writing on the wall and slunk away in 2007 of his own volition before the proverbial really hit the fan. No one dared challenge Gordon Brown for party leadership and he strode into 10 Downing Street as if it was his by right.

Brown

A miserable man and a miserable period. Short, thankfully. His core political vision was to grow the UK public sector to the extent where millions of people in useless non-jobs would always vote Labour in fear of losing their livelihoods. And in doing so eradicate all democratic opposition. Thankfully he was stopped well before realising this grotesque ambition. After three depressing years, he steered the Labour party into electoral defeat in 2010. Labour's fortunes were not helped by the economic shock of 2008 and the truly shocking expenses scandal in 2009.

Brown will be also remembered for an encounter with a feisty lady with the temerity to raise legitimate concerns about benefits and immigration. Thinking the microphones were off, his response was to dismiss her as a 'bigoted woman'. Good riddance.

Cameron

Without a shadow of a doubt 'Call me Dave' had been influenced very heavily by Blair (and puppet-master Campbell). But unlike Blair, his fresh-faced Etonian looks were not enough to deal Brown's Labour party a knock-out blow in the 2010 election. A hung Parliament was the result with the Tories holding 306 seats, Labour on 258 and the Lib Dems on 57. I thought it just about feasible for Brown to cling to power in coalition with Clegg's party but Brown could not bring himself to suck up to them. Cameron could and ended up as the head of a coalition Government with Clegg as deputy. It was definitely a tough cross to bear. I always thought it was like trying to go through life shackled to a corpse. No fun at all.

Which explains the reason why I can recall no significant achievements by the coalition administration. The country at large remained deeply suspicious of the 'European project' and distrust of the unelected 'politburo' in Brussels (and its vast cost) was growing steadily. Many Tory MPs continued to reflect this reality emanating from so many of their own constituents.

Unlike the hapless Major, Cameron was smart enough to recognise this, and during the 2015 election campaign he promised the country a referendum on continued membership of the EU. This and the fact that he was opposed by the talentless Ed Miliband resulted in a tiny majority Government for Cameron with 331 seats - and the Lib Dems returned to impotent obscurity on the back benches where they belong (and are happiest).

In 2016, Cameron delivered on his core referendum commitment but not without first embracing the delusions of the metropolitan remainder elite. He and pretty much everyone in the Westminster bubble, including the BBC, clearly believed the British people would do as they were told and vote to remain. Sadly for them but joyously for the majority that was not the case. The shock was also to reverberate all around Europe: the second biggest contributor to EU funds was quitting. Belts would have to be tightened and squabbles over money would soon start. Just days later, Cameron announced his resignation as prime minister and the internal process began to select his successor.

Boris Johnson, widely acknowledged as a successful mayor of London and a key advocate for the Leave campaign, was widely acknowledged as the stand-out, popular candidate to replace Cameron. But astonishingly, he was betrayed by the odious and self-serving Michael Gove, and this was enough to derail his candidature in the Tory machine. Weeks later, Theresa May was appointed instead.

May

My first memory of Theresa May was in 2017 of her at a desk signing Article 50 to initiate the withdrawal process from the EU. Blimey, I thought, she has actually gone and done it. Surely we have not got ourselves another assertive Thatcher type on our hands? But nobody gets that lucky, I guess. Very quickly May proved to be deeply inadequate and out of her depth. Especially when faced with so many domestic critics unwilling to accept the democratic will of the majority, and an incensed EU machine determined to make the UK suffer for their insolence.

The result was a pathetic sequence of weak compromises and a willingness to sacrifice the sanctity of Northern Ireland for the sin of having a land border with Eire. She crafted several draft withdrawal agreements which satisfied neither leavers or 're-moaners' and finally she announced her resignation in May 2019. When she left, the Daily Telegraph ran a leading article entitled: 'A premiership sinks without trace'. I do not recall the editorial detail but the sentiment fitted perfectly. Finally, Boris Johnson took over.

Johnson

So much promise, so much disappointment, so much authoritarianism, so much debt.

In December 2019, Johnson called a general election knowing he needed a decisive personal mandate to make any kind of impact – and by God did he get it. With a combination of a simple ‘Get Brexit Done’ slogan and the hard left Jeremy Corbyn leading Labour, Johnson’s Tories won a thumping majority of 80 seats and 43.6% of the popular vote, the highest percentage for any party since Thatcher in 1979. The ‘red wall’ across the north turned bright blue as Johnson was able to reach voters that had voted Labour for decades.

There was a definite air of optimism right across the country. Not least in London and the South East. Boris was expected to deliver on Brexit and once freed from the authoritarian shackles of the EU, we could be a free and prosperous global trading nation once again. Great notions in principle but just like West Ham’s fabled bubbles:

*I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air,
They fly so high, nearly reach the sky,
Then like my dreams, they fade and die*

Boris might use that for his gravestone. Because when Covid hit in March 2020 we really needed a steely Churchill but we got a spineless Chamberlain bullied by bogus experts. Panic soon spread throughout Downing Street, Westminster and the media. The BBC and the mainstream media were all screaming that ‘something must be done!’ when we really needed to fall back on our traditional British stoicism. *Keep calm and carry on.*

And Chancellor Sunak was right at the centre of it with his ‘we will do whatever it takes’ commitment combined with Johnson promising to ‘put the big arms of the state around the British people’. Translation: we are going to lockdown the country and spend truly insane amounts of money we do not have. And to hell with the consequences.

One fact soon emerged. A hard fact not my personal opinion. In 2020 the average life expectancy of adults in the UK was 81.4 years but the average age of a Covid victim was 82.5. Please think about that fact. **Deeply.** Covid victims were living longer than regular people! The personal risk of death to anyone under forty was about the same as being struck by lightning.

But this was not a truth that the Government wanted the population to understand. Firstly, they unleashed a propaganda campaign of fear and terror across the land. Secondly they distorted the mortality data by defining a COVID-19 death as defined anyone dying within 28 days of a positive test. Which meant that a 21 year old motorcyclist being killed in a road traffic collision would be classified as a Covid death if they had recently tested positive. As would a person already dying of terminal cancer. Or any other fatal accident or terminal disease.

And what happened? The pond scum in Downing Street all knew perfectly well that the risks from Covid were negligible and so after (or during) work they regularly got drunk, danced and generally partied hard. All this while the police were arresting old ladies for having a cup of tea together. It was arguably the worst and most shameful period in British history.

Perhaps the most damning was the picture of the Queen in black obediently observing the Covid rules and sitting all alone at the funeral of her beloved husband. While Johnson and all his cronies

were partying regularly in Downing Street. And never forget Hancock enjoying his bit on the side whilst his wife was at home in Suffolk with the children. Truly revolting memories.

Once Covid evaporated and the country was left to pick up the pieces, even Johnson's remarkable charisma could not cope with the avalanche of criticism. He was forced out by the Conservatives in 2022. Desperate for some positivity amongst so much horror and debt, Conservative members turned to Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng.

Truss

The core philosophy of this capable and, in my view, likeable woman, backed by her Chancellor, was to reduce taxes and in doing so get people back to work after the Covid madness. And in doing so grow the economy steadily out of trouble. What's not to like about that vision? It is certainly embedded into Reform UK culture. A clear majority of Conservative party members certainly bought into it and Rishi Sunak was beaten into a poor second.

But at this point the country was like a failing business, making loss after loss, racking up seriously unsustainable debts. And in my view we really needed a tough business mind not a political one. Someone who knew that in addition to growing revenues by getting people back to work (and weening people off benefits) we also needed to slash operating costs. In other words take an axe to the cost of the bloated civil service and thousands of non-jobs in the public sector.

Either this did not occur to Truss and Kwarteng, or perhaps they thought it would be far too painful in a political context. So their naive optimism spooked the markets and the men in grey suits very soon came for them. Sunak emerged as the only credible Tory candidate left standing. Impressive perhaps in a western movie shoot-out not so much in a political scenario crying out for inspiration.

Sunak

In my mind Sunak only had one credible option. Which was to call a televised press conference, alone without notes or slides, look the British public in the eye and say: *The truth is folks, we are really in the shit, and its far worse than anyone knows.*

And then elaborate. But of course Sunak himself was a primary architect of the spending insanity that consumed the UK in 2020 and 2021. And the four words: *I got it wrong* are almost physically impossible for any career politician to speak. Especially those with big egos (and plenty of family money to fall back on). Instead he appointed the arch globalist and lockdown zealot, Jeremy Hunt as Chancellor, who duly raised taxes to the highest levels for 70 years. Interest rates were also raised to choke down inflation and almost everyone soon felt intense financial pain. Especially the poorest.

To add to the depressing horizon, the Covid Enquiry started chewing through hundreds of millions of pounds, the greatest predetermined establishment cover-up of all time, refusing to consider whether lockdowns were worth all the horrendous social, economic, educational and health impacts. But convened simply to confirm that lockdowns should have been earlier, longer, harder simply to protect all the vested interests and reputations. Truly, the sight and sound of the British establishment protecting themselves leaves me in dire need of a vomit bucket.

So where did this leave me? Like millions of others I had lost all confidence in the British political class in general and the Conservatives in particular. And Labour were no different. All tax-and-spend authoritarians, intoxicated on power for its own ends, with no one at all willing to confront identity

politics, horrendous debts, out-of-control immigration, a spiralling benefits bill and the evil idea that children should be encouraged to 'choose' their own gender from a long list.

I felt like a rat in a very dark corner. Only one way to come out: fighting. So I joined Reform UK as the only party willing to campaign for what really matters to ordinary British people. I hope you will do the same.

Bill Wright, December 2023