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Blair must push his agenda now

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BEGINNING with Robert Walpole and including Tony Blair there have been 51 British prime ministers whose office became known to the law only in 1905. Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour prime minister was a most remarkable man.

He had not been to a public school or university nor had he distinguished himself in commerce or a profession. He was the only Labour PM to have come from the working class, unlike Blair who went to Oxford from a Scottish public school.

Harold Wilson was a scholar and Clement Attlee, I think, ranks first among 20th century British PMs. And if the test of political leadership is survival, Attlee's 20-year leadership of the Labour party is still unsurpassed by any other leader in Britain.

But Blair, unlike his predecessors, has achieved in four years what they failed to do in Labour history: a second term in power with a huge majority.

As I said in my NST Diary in Sunday Times winning or losing elections depends on this old adage: "Oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them."

Four years ago John Major's Conservative government lost to Blair's New (reformed) Labour, Tok Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat got Kelantan on a silver platter ten years ago from an inept Umno government, and more recently another incorrigible East Coast Walter Mitty presented oil-rich Terengganu to another cleric, Haji Abdul Hadi Awang. Like the imperious and grieving British Conservatives the Umno functionaries in the two East Coast States, should know there exists a serious danger that this could happen elsewhere. They are out of touch with the voters!

Blair's reputation - I can't say it's unpleasing - is a repetition of four years ago. He has become even more formidable. Despite devastating condemnation of New Labour's four years in power by the right-wing Conservatives, the British electorate still completely trusts him. It accepts the fact that New Labour has become a centrist party - it has not governed Britain by stealth.

Lady Thatcher's robust campaigning - she was tactful, some claimed, to the point of invisibility as her hand-picked candidate to succeed her, John Major, waged a hopeless battle against an inexperienced Blair in 1997 - on behalf of the hapless William Hague, Leader of the Tory Party, and her far-fetched warning that Blair's second term would return the nation to old socialism largely fell on deaf ears. Her alarm call was received with derision.

The Conservative stand on asylum seekers, immigrants and describing Britain as a "foreign land" (read too many coloured people in Britain. In fact the number is very small in the 60-million plus population), their poor image among the poor (always talking about tax cuts which benefit the rich), their implacable hostility to the euro, and the clumsy attempt to make the election into a plebiscite (on Euro) did not go down well with the voters.

This was in spite of the far right's good showing (though the British National Front (British Nazis) did not win) in Oldham West - the centre of the worst race riots Britain has seen in 15 years.

It is estimated that the total population of coloured Britons - mainly Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Afro-Caribbeans - is between four

million and five million and, according to The Guardian, black voters might have swayed a hundred seats in favour of Labour. The majority of coloured voters supported Labour despite their low participation in even middle-of-the-rung level in British government, much less in higher places.

The repeat landslide ought to boost Blair's mandate to push what he had pledged to do. His government was re-elected with a handsome majority - though obtaining only 43.9 per cent of the popular votes. Under the system of first-past-the-post New Labour won 413 seats in the House of Commons (659 members). Its majority was slightly down (165) over the 179-seat margin in 1997 (inflicting the biggest defeat on the Tory party in 150 years).

That historic win ended 18 years of successful yet uncompassionate rule by the Tories, first under the uncompromising and domineering Margaret Thatcher and then the grey John Major.

This is for Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad: Gordon Brown's (Chancellor of the Exchequer or Minister of Finance) handling of the economy (which is relatively thriving) for the past four years was regarded as the key to Labour's re-election with a huge majority.

Brown is expected to take over the premiership from Blair, some time in the future. Whoever becomes our next FM is very crucial and I want to repeat what I wrote on Sunday. That it's got to be Dr Mahathir himself. It will enable him to have direct control over the running of our economy, pork-barrel politics, political patronage, institute reforms and annihilate (sorry, control) money politics. No one else has the stature to do all this.

Any political observer in Kuala Lumpur worth his salt knew or at least had an intuition that "trouble" was brewing between Dr Mahathir and Tun Daim Zainuddin but all preferred not to speak (or write) about it despite the rumours.

Whatever, the PM, like the British PM, is the First Lord of the Treasury. The Minister of Finance is only the Second Lord of the Treasury.

Naturally, the PM's views must be fully taken into account and they must have a pretty good special relationship, believing in the same political and financial principles. Once that relationship becomes untenable they must part and that was what happened between Dr Mahathir and Daim.

I can claim, if I may, to know both men pretty well - I am sorry things have turned out as they have. I had a strong impression that they were not as close as before. I observed this when I returned home from New York in May last year. Now, Dr Mahathir, like Blair, must concentrate on getting things done. What is next on Blair's agenda?

Barring earthquakes, I think, a referendum on euro entry is very likely. Until that time comes he will be busy with his attempts to improve Britain and make it a really Cool Britain, or at least a more pleasant place to live in than it is now.

I feel sorry for the hapless 40-year-old Hague. He has taken full responsibility for the Conservative defeat by quickly resigning as leader of the party. Some people say this makes a euro referendum likely even quicker. What I want to say here is this: the sooner the Conservatives (and the British people) begin to recognise the fact that there are now coloured British people, the easier will a multi-cultural society - though thank heavens not homogenous - be created.

I lived in Britain for a number of years and enjoyed it. I had not gone out there to take anyone's job. Because of that, I suppose, I was embraced. The unpalatable truth is that race does matter but we also know the riots in West Oldham and the trouble in Taman Medan are not race alone.

It is the feeling of being excluded from the mainstream: Exclusion is actually a function of poverty. Perhaps, poverty is the major cause of both troubles.

I shall candidly state, for the umpteenth time, some truths about ourselves. I wrote this on a flight back from Kota Baru on Sunday evening. What I observed in Kelantan (and elsewhere, such as in Baling), and heard from three very senior Umno leaders, makes it clear there are difficulties, controversies and divisions within Umno and now MCA too. Haven't the events of 1999 taught us anything?

There is an excessive passion among the Malays for politics (which is scary) because it is almost to the exclusion of everything else. Politics is more to them than a sport or a game one plays, it's an obsession. Umno must play the game until the final whistle blows in 2004. The game starts now!

There is no more time for talking, no more presentation. Instead, BN or Umno must not only change the pace of the government, but also the reputation of the party and government in the eyes of the voters and of the world.

Who says politics is boring? Ask any Malay anywhere and he will swear to you it's a matter of life and death. Fight hard and fair. Umno must work harder to regain the lost ground. Whenever you fight, please do not take me literally as the British Deputy Prime John Prescott did. That "Prescott punch" did spice up an otherwise unexciting polls. Prescott remains DPM sans his environment, transport and regional affairs portfolios.

Anglo-Malaysian bilateral relations are good, and I expect they will become better and even closer with the departure of Robin Cook as Foreign Secretary. His successor, Jack Straw, is supposed to be more balanced on Europe and world politics. Well, people say Straw has a reputation for being more eurosceptic, not a difficult comparison with the voluble europhile Cook. I shall not predict what will happen though I believe the euro remains very much on the cards.

I do hope the large majority will make the New Labour government even more powerful than during the last four years and continue to convince the people that the old Labour is gone and buried.

Keep everything that is best about British and let the Conservatives such as Margaret Thatcher and Hague linger in the past and out of step. It does look as if the Conservatives are going to be in the doldrums for some time.

Whatever people say about the New Labour, Blair has lost none of his charm. His task was made easier by Hague, who is as uninspiring as weak Boh tea.

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