



THE BLAIR YEARS

Extracts from

THE ALASTAIR CAMPBELL DIARIES



DR. MAHATHIR

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**THE ALASTAIR
CAMPBELL DIARIES**

Edited by
ALASTAIR CAMPBELL
and
RICHARD STOTT



HUTCHINSON: LONDON

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1011577



This edition published by Hutchinson in 2007

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

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Hutchinson
The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780091796297 (hardback)
ISBN 9780091920630 (paperback)

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For Fiona

Our children, Rory, Calum and Grace

And our parents, Donald and Betty Campbell,
Bob and Audrey Millar

Introduction

On May 12, 1994, Labour leader John Smith suffered a heart attack. I heard the news from Hilary Coffman, John's press officer, as I was on my way to work at the *Today* newspaper, where I was assistant editor. I could tell from the tone of Hilary's voice that he was in all probability dying, if not already dead. I diverted to the House of Commons, where the news was confirmed to me by a tearful Jack Cunningham, John's close friend and colleague. Amid the sadness I felt during a long day spent writing and recording tributes, I had two other very powerful instincts. One, that Tony Blair would be the next Labour leader. And two, though Blair and I had never discussed the possibility, that I would work for him.

Even the day before John's death, a straw poll of opinion formers might well have put Gordon Brown ahead of Blair as most likely leader. But polls are inevitably based upon the question 'what if?' Nobody was expecting John Smith to die that May morning. We were expecting him to lead Labour into the next general election against John Major's governing Tory Party. When a 'what if?' suddenly becomes directly relevant, moods can change and strange things happen. What many people had largely taken for granted – that Brown would follow Smith – was now being questioned, and the qualities Labour most needed to reverse a series of electoral failures were suddenly, and widely, thought to be best embodied in Blair.

Through that day, as I scuttled back and forth between my office in the Commons and 4 Millbank, where the TV and radio stations covering Parliament are based, I carefully avoided questions of succession. But when, on BBC's *Newsnight* programme, I was asked direct who I thought would take over, I said what I thought: Tony Blair.

I do not have a great memory – one of the reasons I keep a diary. But I do have a vivid recollection of my first meeting with Blair. He had just been elected to Parliament in 1983 and my partner's brother,

a lawyer, had told me to keep an eye out for the new member for Sedgefield. He is bright, I was told. Very funny, engaging. He is not your average or typical Labour MP. So when I saw him entering the members' lobby in the House of Commons, where I was then working for the *Mirror*, I went over to introduce myself. He was wearing a badly fitting beige suit. He had an enormous smile, which would one day become famous the world over. After a little bit of small talk about family and mutual friends, we were onto a subject both of us spent a lot of time thinking about – what more did Labour need to do to win power?

In the ensuing years, I would have numerous such conversations with him, Gordon Brown, Peter Mandelson, Philip Gould, and many others. I worked closely with all four, me as a political journalist who never hid his colours, Gould as a dedicated and obsessive pollster and strategist, Mandelson as first the party's campaigns director and then as an MP, Brown and Blair as the two glittering Labour talents of their generation.

They had flourished under Neil Kinnock's leadership. Under John Smith, Brown and Blair were seen as the youth to complement the older man's experience, but they were often impatient at the pace of change. They did not believe that governments lost elections – though John Major's faltering and divided post-Thatcherite administration might help in that process. They thought Oppositions had to win them, and worked tirelessly and restlessly on the policy and strategic decisions they believed essential if Labour were to get back into government.

Brown was always seen as the senior figure, not least by Blair, and the reversal of that position in the wake of John Smith's death would be the source of some considerable tension, creative and not so creative, during the days that followed, and then on and off during the entirety of Blair's 13-year leadership.

Blair came to national prominence on the back of two issues in particular – the trade unions and crime. On the first, as employment spokesman, his deft changing of Labour's policy on the closed shop established his modernising credentials and, just as importantly, showed he was not scared of a fight. On the second, particularly in the wake of the killing of James Bulger, a Liverpool toddler tortured and murdered by two youngsters, he showed his ability to articulate issues of social concern in a way that others on the left and right of politics struggled to. 'Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', a line hammered out with Brown, was one of his most enduring sound bites when he became Shadow Home Secretary.

But there has always been a lot more to Blair than style and sound bite, good communicator though he is. He joined the Labour Party because it is the party that best captured his own beliefs and values, developed in a comfortable and caring middle-class upbringing, reinforced by a Christian faith that runs deep. But he feared that unless the party adapted to the modern post-Cold War, post-Thatcherite world, it would ossify and die. He was always pushing at the outer edge of modernisation. That modernising zeal was what ultimately made the offer to work for him irresistible. I took some time to think about it. I had a nice life, a young family, a good salary and a growing broadcasting portfolio, so it was not a straightforward decision. I had a reputation for picking fights. I have never been good at hiding what I feel. I have a temper. I admitted to him at the time I was worried about the idea of subsuming my whole ego and persona in someone else's ambition. I had also had a serious psychotic breakdown in 1986 and was concerned that the pressures of the job he was offering might lead me once more down some very dark and dangerous alleyways.

He knew all that. 'I'm not worried if you're not worried,' he said. I said what if I am worried? 'I'm still not worried,' he said.

I had my partner Fiona, my parents and many friends, Neil Kinnock among them, pleading with me not to do it. They feared it would take over my life, that I would end up loathing the media and getting angry at the share of the load I might have to carry for politicians, who can be a difficult breed. They were right; right too that at times it put an almost intolerable strain on relationships at home. Yet for all that, even with all the Tory and media bile that came my way, I am glad I did it, and grateful for the opportunity he gave me to make a difference in turning Labour from a losing to a winning party, and one comfortable using power to make change.

It was his boldness that finally won me over. On a walk in France in the summer of 1994, he confided that in his first conference speech as leader he intended to launch a review of the old Clause 4 at the heart of the party's constitution, which committed Labour to economic policies it no longer believed in let alone pursued. That boldness shows itself again and again through these pages – in his determination to ensure that modernisation of the party cut so deep, across virtually every major area of policy, that the public could not fail to notice it; in the new 'fairness not favours' relationship he forged with the trade unions, which he felt had not fully understood or faced up to change; in his constant driving for an agreed economic approach that set the context for virtually all of the major domestic changes that would follow. It shows itself too in his campaigning skills. On the road, he

THE BLAIR YEARS is the most compelling and revealing account of contemporary politics you will ever read. Taken from Alastair Campbell's daily diaries, it charts the rise of New Labour and the tumultuous years of Tony Blair's leadership, providing the first important record of a turbulent decade in our national life.

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Often described as the second most powerful figure in Britain, Alastair Campbell is no stranger to controversy. Hated and admired in equal measure, he was pivotal to the founding of New Labour and the sensational election victory of 1997. As Blair's press secretary, strategist and trusted confidant, Campbell spent more waking hours

alongside the Prime Minister than anyone. His diaries – at times brutally frank, often funny, always compelling – take the reader right to the heart of government.

THE BLAIR YEARS is a story of politics in the raw, of progress and setback, of reputations made and destroyed, under the relentless scrutiny of a 24-hour media. Unflinchingly told, it covers the crises and scandals, the rows and resignations, the ups and downs of Britain's hothouse politics. But amid the big events are insights and observations that make this a remarkably human portrayal of some of the most powerful people in the world.

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Alastair Campbell was born in Keighley, Yorkshire in 1957. He worked for Tony Blair from 1994–2003, first as press secretary, then as official spokesman and director of communications and strategy. Since 2003 he has been engaged mainly in writing, public speaking and working for Leukaemia Research, where he is chairman of fund-raising. He has continued to act as an adviser to Blair and the Labour Party, including during the 2005 election campaign. He lives in North London with his partner of 25 years, Fiona Millar. They have three children: Rory, 19, Calum, 17 and Grace, 13. His interests include running, triathlon, bagpipes and Burnley Football Club.

Three years ago Alastair Campbell asked Richard Stott to help edit his diaries.

Richard Stott is an award-winning journalist who twice edited the DAILY MIRROR. He writes a political and current affairs column for the SUNDAY MIRROR.

BIOGRAPHY £14.99

ISBN 978-0-09-192063-0



9 780091 920630

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Front cover photograph © Nick Danziger. Back cover photograph © Guardian Newspapers Ltd. 2003

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