Brown's Britannia, Warts and All

To escape New York's summer heat, my wife and I fled to the United Kingdom, only to plunge from the griddle into the washbasin. "Water levels still rising as thousands hit by worst floods in modern British history," headlined *The Guardian* (July 24). As if to make American visitors feel right at home, the adjoining headline elaborated: "Ministers warned three years ago over flood defense failings." Think of it: here is a country not unused to rain and yet its officials were caught by surprise when a 3-inch surge occurring within 60 minutes turned the Midlands into a lake, leaving as many as 350,000 homes without power and/or water. Yet, in shades of FEMA, Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labor government had failed to act on reports in 2004 and 2005 that spoke firmly of the need to overhaul obsolete flood defenses, integrate emergency responses, and coordinate information services.

Still, as travelers trapped in the Great Flood of '07, we are pleased to report that the Dunkirk spirit survives. We were bound on a Virgin express train from Birmingham to Oxford when a hesitant announcement explained that tunnels were somehow flooded and that, um, everybody had to disembark at the next local stop, Royal Leamington Spa. Stalled at the station for two hours, passengers joked, circulated cell phones, and formed queues as two buses finally materialized. All remained placid as the vehicle plowed through gullies of water, passed stalled motorcars, and ended an hour or so later at Banbury on the fringe of Oxford. There we boarded the last train destined for Oxford only to learn that a friend who had been waiting for hours to meet us had left the station fifteen minutes earlier after being assured, "Nobody is getting through." We located a taxi, pressed on to Mansfield College, where we had already booked rooms for a week and were welcomed by the head porter, who asked poker-faced if we had remembered our life jackets. For the first time, we learned from him why train service ceased. In Victorian times, railway builders laid tracks in lowlands, alongside rivers and streams, and so tunnels were vulnerable to rising waters, unlike highways, which were just that: higher.

In short, the infrastructure was far more fragile than we imagined. Suppose a terrorist had mined one or more tunnels, or a key bridge or a riverside lock, precipitating a massive gridlock in the Greater London region. Suppose further that humans were known to be responsible for the calamity, and imagine how affected peoples might behave if their neighbors were foreign-looking—or worse, known to be Muslims. Alas, these bleak conjectures were hardly far-fetched. Two years ago, British-bred suicide-bombers sowed havoc in the London underground, and this summer, just before the heavens burst, other jihadists parked a car loaded with explosives near a London nightclub while their comrades drove a Jeep into Glasgow's international airport and set it ablaze.

Anticipating such threats is but one of the challenges crowding the inbox of Gordon Brown, who after 11 years as chancellor of the exchequer finally moved in July from 11 Downing Street to his new quarters at Number 10. He was welcomed by the improvised explosive vehicles, followed by the Great Flood. "You wanted to start with a bang," says

Sarah Brown to her trying-to-smile husband Gordon, as depicted on the cover of *Private Eye* (July 19), the satirical weekly that remains a barometer of Britain's prevailing political winds. Indeed, the car and Jeep bombers may have figured that the transition would somehow play to their advantage.

The contrary proved true. As incoming prime minister, Gordon Brown benefits from a brief but traditional honeymoon, and in any case he cannot be held responsible for any mishaps or confusions attributable to his predecessor's policies. His manner played well: calm, friendly if dour, the demeanor of a solid and sensible family solicitor. Like Blair, Brown was bred in Scotland, but otherwise they are very unlike: the smooth-talking Tony went to a posh private secondary school, the gravely-voiced Gordon to a state school. While both belong to the broad center of the no-longer socialist Labor Party, Brown is closer in manner and thinking to the party's working-family base.

Sitting in a Manchester political meeting, the *Guardian* columnist John Harris heard a Brown speech peppered with "themes you would not have heard from any Blairite—a tuning up of the volume on child poverty and an acknowledgment of the insecurity and vulnerability that has come with globalisation." And, in Harris's view, this replay of solid, social democratic principles was a welcome change from the "fuzzy euphoria" of a decade ago, with its trendy chatter about New Labor, Cool Britannia, and the People's Princess (Blair's phrase, which echoed promiscuously during this summer's tenth anniversary of Diana's death).

Decoding Gordon Brown

Yet, it not always easy to decode Gordon Brown's intentions, especially on the touchy issue of Anglo-American relations. He is wriggling. On the one hand, in order to loosen his predecessor's embrace of George W. Bush, Brown pointedly avoids the boilerplate phrase "war on terror" and refers instead to Osama bin Laden as a murderer rather than an ideological adversary. He has appointed Mark Malloch Brown (no kin, but also Scottish), an outspoken critic of the Iraq war, to a high-ranking Foreign Ministry post.

On the other hand, Gordon Brown's chief of staff has circulated a memorandum reminding all ministers "We will not allow people to separate us from the United States in dealing with the common challenges we face around the world." At the same time, Brown capitalized on the summer bomb threats by unveiling his own get-tougher-on-terror measures, outbidding both Blair and the conservatives. On July 25, he adopted a Tory proposal to create a single robust border force to protect ports and airfields, while challenging the opposition to approve the extension of up to 56 days in which terror suspects can be detained without charge—virtual internment, in the view of Amnesty International. Somewhat confusingly, the prime minister insisted, "Liberty is the first and founding value of our country. Security is the first duty of our government." As the *Sunday Times* put it on July 15, "Mr. Brown wants it both ways. He wants to signal a distancing from Washington while maintaining that nothing has changed. This is both risky and dishonest. If he thinks it is in Britain's interest to pursue a more multilateral approach, he should say so." In his subsequent Washington meeting with President Bush, Gordon Brown had the facial expression of someone itching to catch the next plane back to London, even as he claimed to share America's global concerns.

A parody speech in *Private Eye* mocking the new premier's murky and rambling inaugural address catches his uneasiness in his new skin, and his rivalry with Tony Blair: "[People] have noticed I haven't mentioned Iraq yet. And they rightly want to know who was responsible for all this. Well, let me tell you a story. When I was a wee bairn growing up in

the small British town of Kincaldy, I went to the local school. And not Eton [attended by Tory leader David Cameron] or Fettes [Blair's posh school], like some people who didn't listen to the British people when they demanded change, particularly at the top. And do you know what the motto of the school was? It was one I can never forget. *Usque conebor*, which means 'I will try my utmost', and it is an important change from some other people's school mottoes, which must have read 'I shall lie my utmost.' But, as I said, things have changed, and I learned there, in that small British state school, the most important lesson of my life: 'Try, try and try again until you become prime minister.'"

Still, how easy it is for a *Private Eye* satirist, his or her wit doubtless massaged in an elite public school, to mock a politician's reluctance to speak truth to power, whether that power rests along the Potomac, in class prejudice, or in opinion polls. This was driven home to me serendipitously, during our stay in Birmingham, which we visited out of curiosity concerning the city whose mills, capitalists and politicians jump-started the industrial revolution. Steel and steam have long ago given way to the shopping malls and brand-label boutiques in the celebrated Bull Ring, but the city's Art Museum attests to the wealth and taste of Birmingham's deceased moguls. Here, on its walls, reposes the portrait of Oliver Cromwell by the Dutch-born Sir Peter Lely that reputedly inspired this memorable declaration by the Lord Protector: "Mr. Lely, I desire you should use all your skill to paint your picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me. Otherwise, I will never pay a farthing for it." However, if you look closely at the resulting image, you notice there are no warts. Sir Peter seemingly understood that honesty had its limits in treating with the powerful.

Ghosts in the Citadel

In the United Kingdom, there are still ancient citadels of privilege that a politician discusses with a measure of caution. We visited two of them, Eton College and Cambridge's Trinity College, each unique and worth a detour. To get to Eton, one goes to Windsor and turns right at the bridge, walking about a mile to the sumptuous royal college (i.e. secondary school) established in 1440 by Henry VI. The original Gothic chapel and schoolroom are still extant, the latter filled with initials carved deep in its desks. From these halls came no fewer than 20 British prime ministers, including Gladstone and Wellington, and among Old Etonians now bidding for office are the current leader of the Tory opposition, David Cameron, and Boris Johnson, the bumptious editor of the *Spectator*, and now the improbable challenger of London's left-wing Laborite Mayor "Red Ken" Livingstone. Thus the mayoralty race will pit two of Britain's most engaging mavericks against each other. Mayor Livingstone is best known for his crackdown on commuter traffic in central London, while Johnson is a libertarian nonpareil. As sheer theater, the mayoral campaign promises to equal n interest the failed candidacies in New York of Norman Mailer and William F. Buckley, Jr.

Amongst the regiment of eminent Old Etonians whose portraits we sought out was the imperious Lord Curzon, the greatest British Viceroy to India, who in an 1898 college speech offered this relevant observation: "The East is a university in which no scholar takes his degree." Yet Eton moves with the times; each summer there is an intake from Japan of young attendees at a pricey summer course—and when the makers of the classic film, *Chariots of Fire,* needed a location for the hero's record-breaking run around a famous Cambridge quadrangle, Eton said yes, please shoot, while Trinity College, where the run against a clock's bells actually took place, said no.

Like Eton, Trinity elicits an unintended gasp. Its wealth is prodigious, with an endowment reckoned at £2.5 billion plus enough land to rival Luxembourg; its wealth supports some 650 undergraduates, 320 postgraduate students, and 160 fellows. Founded by Henry VIII in 1546, Trinity counts among its brood 31 Nobel Prize winners, mostly in sciences and mathematics (more Nobel laureates than France and Belgium put together). Its famous Great Court, the biggest of any Oxbridge college, was known to Newton, Tennyson, Thackeray, and Nabokov, as well as the infamous Cambridge spies: Philby, Burgess, Blunt, and McLean, who doubtless inhaled their sense of invulnerability within these ivied walls.

The legacy of these privileged institutions poses an abiding dilemma for British society. They offend egalitarian sentiments, they play to an obsession with accents, they give its graduates an undoubted leg up over those attending state schools and redbrick colleges. And yet successive Labor governments have held back from abolishing fee-based private schools. Indefensibly elitist they may be, but they also breed politicians with rapier tongues (compare House of Commons debates with those in the U.S. Congress) and by precept and example their graduates encourage a pervasive tone of civility. Britain remains a country where references to ladies and gentlemen are not wholly cant, where decent public manners remain the norm. In the Birmingham station, we noticed, an announcer says he is "extremely sorry" if a train arrives 20 minutes late, words rarely, if ever, heard in Grand Central. What is called the aristocratic embrace can rise benignly above ideology, as indicated by a sign we noted at Oxford's Rhodes House, a temple to the super-imperialist Cecil Rhodes, that announces its partnership with the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Auntie Beeb's Ordeals

Moreover, anti-elitist populism can erode and degrade cultural institutions rooted in older codes of service, as instanced by the scandals that now beset the venerable British Broadcasting Corporation. To hype ratings, BBC news programs fecklessly broadcast a fake item about Queen Elizabeth II storming out of a photo session with Annie Liebovitz; this was followed by leaked disclosures of frauds in "actuality" programming in which BBC staff members posed as participants and winners in phone-in contests. The *Guardian,* still vigilant about lapses in public morality, complained that as in previous scandals, the root cause lay in "the decision by the world's leading public broadcaster to borrow the clothes of its commercial rivals. Not content with being publicly funded and much-loved, the corporation again and again tries to be just as racy as the rest of the pack." Thus since the 1990s, the BBC has gone down-market under executives who have shriveled production staffs and outsourced documentary, dramatic, and entertainment programs. (In a further indication of widening cultural illiteracy, a dozen British publishers recently rejected out of hand Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* unaware their collective legs were being pulled. The mock submission began with perhaps the most celebrated first sentence in British fiction, "It is a truth universally acknowledged....")

Still, remarkably, refreshingly and thankfully, this erosion seems not to extend to print journalism. Britain remains a news addict's paradise: stopping at the local news agent is like revisiting an American past when major cities had three or four and sometimes (as in New York) a dozen daily newspapers. British readers still support five outstanding national dailies (the *Times, Guardian, Telegraph, Independent* and *Financial Times*) as well as a battery of tabloids and papers that fall in between (*Daily Mail, Express*, and *Evening Standard),* plus a selection of independently edited Sunday papers. The prose on the whole is better than passable, books and the arts get far more space than in the typical American daily, and

the range of reportage is impressive. And no country is more thoroughly, even obsessively, covered than the United States, e.g. "Welcome to Richistan: The American Dream of riches for all is turning into a nightmare of inequality" (*The Observer,* July 22); "Saved by the bonds of war, 'lucky' Iraqis trickle into the US: Refugees of post-Saddam chaos need friends with influence to get into America" (*The Guardian,* July 24); or also, from the same paper, July 19, "America is just starting to wake up to the awesome scale of its Iraqi disaster," (which runs over a column by the normally pro-American Oxford scholar Timothy Garton Ash, that concludes: "Looking back over a quarter of a century of writing about international affairs, I cannot recall a more comprehensive and avoidable man-made disaster.")

So what will Gordon Brown's Britain be like? How will he deal with Bush's America, an aging infrastructure, increasingly freak weather, gaps in the welfare state net, bursts of terrorism, and the abiding contradictions of class, culture, and fairness that his own biography encapsulates? A very interesting prospect. We look forward to a return visit, but not in the rainy season. ●

—Karl E. Meyer