

Blair not my poodle, says Bush

AFP, London

Outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair, often caricatured as US President George W. Bush's poodle, is no such thing, Bush said in an interview published yesterday.

In comments printed the day Blair is set to vacate his Downing Street offices, Bush told The Sun tabloid from Washington that he also wished he had Blair's oratory skills.

"I've heard he's been called Bush's poodle," the president said of Blair, who has been heavily criticised in Britain for his decision to stand by the United States first in its invasion of Iraq in 2003, and later in its refusal to criticise Israel for its bombing of Lebanon last summer.

"He's bigger than that. This is just background noise, a distraction from big things. This kind of thing is just silly ridicule and that's how I treat it."

Bush also told the daily that he had tried to convince Blair to stay on until the end of next year, when Bush finishes his time as president: "I selfishly said to him, 'I hope you can stay out my term'."

2-state solution only way for ME peace: Blair

AFP, London

Outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday that a two-state solution is the "absolute priority" to bring peace to the Middle East amid speculation he is to become an envoy there.

"The absolute priority is to try to effect what is now the consensus across the international community that the only way of bringing stability and peace in the Middle East is a two state solution," he said at his last appearance before Britain's lawmakers, shortly before standing down.

He said this means "a state of Israel which is secure and confident in its security, and a Palestinian state that is not merely viable in terms of its territory but in terms of its institutions and governance."

"I believe it is possible to do that but it will require a huge intensity of focus and work," added Blair, who was to hand over to his finance minister Gordon Brown later in the day.

His comments came amid mounting signs that the so-called Mideast Quartet -- comprising the United States, the United Nations, the European Union and Russia -- is about to name him as its envoy to the region.

Britain braces for new style under Brown

AFP, London

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Britain is bracing for a distinct change of style under new prime minister Gordon Brown, even if he will likely follow a broadly similar agenda to Tony Blair.

Despite Brown's efforts to shrug off his dour image, his style in office is expected to contrast markedly with Blair's easy media-friendly manner which has charmed so many at home and abroad.

On substance, Brown is widely seen as more eurosceptic than his predecessor and more cautious in his relations with Washington, after the anger triggered by Blair's decision to become Bush's closest ally over the 2003 Iraq war.

But hours before yesterday's handing over of power in London, US President George W. Bush sought to downplay Brown's reputation as overly serious, and insisted they got on well.

Gordon came here and he wasn't the image of the dour Scotsman at all. He was relaxed. It was a good meeting," he told The Sun daily, adding: "Tony has been very gracious about Gordon to me."

Brown, described by a former top civil servant as "Stalinist" in the run-up to his succession, was widely alleged to have orchestrated a political coup last year which forced Blair to agree to stand down.

But as he prepares for office he has sought to humanise his image, smiling more and changing his haircut, and promising an end to "celebrity" politics -- a barely-disguised dig at Blair's constant courting of the media.

He also sought, albeit subtly, to

PROFILE OF GORDON BROWN

A 'heavyweight' comes out of the shadows

AFP, London

Denounced by critics as a brooding control freak, but lauded by supporters as a misunderstood political heavyweight, Gordon Brown will finally step out of Tony Blair's shadow yesterday.

After a decade as chancellor -- during which the two men's relationship has reportedly soured from tolerant alliance to poisonous rivalry -- Brown will become prime minister, after replacing Blair as Labour leader Sunday.

Since being named to succeed Blair last month, the 56-year-old Scot has battled to shed his uncharismatic image -- aides say he is genial in private -- but he will have

cially at 18.

Brown lost his initial attempt to join parliament in 1979, but was elected to represent Dunfermline East in 1983 -- the same year Blair became an MP -- and went on to hold various posts in Labour's 18 years of opposition.

He worked as a politics lecturer at his alma mater and Caledonian University, before moving on to Scottish TV, a franchise of Britain's biggest commercial broadcaster, ITV.

In 1992, after Labour lost a fourth successive election, he was named Labour's finance spokesman; at the time, he was mentioned, along with Blair, as one of then leader John Smith's potential successors.

Two years later, though, Smith died and according to a popular legend, Brown and Blair made a deal in a north London restaurant whereby Brown would back Blair's leadership bid, and Blair would stand down in favour of Brown as little as four years into a Labour government.

Following Labour's 1997 election victory, Brown was named Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister), and within a week he gave the Bank of England, Britain's central bank, full independence to tackle inflation.

In the past decade, in which he has become the longest-serving finance minister without interruption, he has also championed the cause of forgiving developing country debt.

His detractors, however, chide him for his controlling nature -- a former top civil servant described him as "Stalinist" and a cabinet colleague said he was a "control freak".

Brown's credibility in managing the economy has also been hurt by a string of recent scandals involving the country's state pension fund, while his commitment to fiscal prudence, which earned him the "Iron Chancellor" nickname, has been drawn into question.

The chancellor is reportedly more of an Atlanticist than a Europhile -- when Blair wanted to lead Britain into the eurozone, Brown effectively vetoed the decision.

He has also acknowledged that mistakes were made in Blair's biggest foreign policy adventure -- Iraq -- though he has been broadly supportive of Britain's military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Brown has steered Britain to an unprecedented era of sustained growth, high employment, and low interest rates, all despite suffering personal setbacks in recent years.

In January 2002, his first child Jennifer was born prematurely and died 10 days after her birth. He has since had two boys, though the second was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis in November, aged just four months.

Through it all, though, it has been his relationship with Blair that has grabbed the headlines and captured the country's attention, with tensions rarely far from the surface.

The chancellor was alleged to be the mastermind of an attempted political coup last September when eight junior members of government resigned in a matter of days, calling for Blair to step down -- he denies the charge.

distance himself from Blair over Iraq, the key issue that dogged the second half of Blair's premiership.

While ruling out immediate withdrawal of British troops and vowing to "keep our obligations to the Iraqi people", he has admitted that mistakes were made and called for more focus on development and reconciliation.

Some say the "big issue" for Brown will be his relations with Bush's successor.

"If there's a Democrat there in 18



Gordon Brown

months, the stage will be set for a renegotiation of the Anglo-US relationship," said Mark Wickham-Jones of Bristol University.

On Europe, Britain's other key alliance, Brown is expected to be cooler than Blair.

But as he prepares for office he has sought to humanise his image, smiling more and changing his haircut, and promising an end to "celebrity" politics -- a barely-disguised dig at Blair's constant courting of the media.

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"We will remember Tony Blair with affection, pride and admiration," she said.

"But today as well is Gordon Brown's day and I think that sense of Labour really renewing itself, not just in terms of the faces and personalities but also that sense of energy, dynamism," she told broadcaster GMTV.

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