

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 envied Blair's speaking ability, which has earned the prime minister plaudits from his supporters and opponents.

He added 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 give effect to 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

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 handover 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 Brown 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 humanize 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.

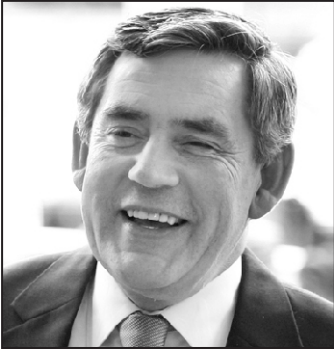
He also sought, albeit subtly, to

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 "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.

It was reportedly his influence which has kept Britain out of the single currency. New French President Nicolas Sarkozy, speaking shortly after his election last month, urged Brown not to see the European Union as "outmoded".

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

his work cut out after the media-friendly Blair.

James Gordon Brown was born to a Presbyterian Scottish pastor's family on February 20, 1951. At the age of just 16 he went to Edinburgh University, where he gained a first-class degree in history followed by a doctorate.

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.

During those early years, he forged a strong link with the Labour Party, first offering to canvass for them in a by-election when he was 12, and later joining the party offi-

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.

Sharing an office in parliament, as well as a desire to modernise the party with Blair, Brown has been described as the man who tutored Blair in national politics.

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.



Mothers of British soldiers killed in Iraq protest in the grounds of 10 Downing Street in central London yesterday.

'I want to see him going in flesh and blood'

AFP, London

As the British flags lining the street behind her flutter in the breeze, Donna Mahoney holds a picture of her dead husband and says Tony Blair's departure will help her start a new chapter in her life.

Mahoney's soldier husband Peter killed himself in 2004 after a tour of duty in Iraq and now she has come to Downing Street to see off Blair, who hands over as prime minister to Gordon Brown later Wednesday.

"I just want to make sure he's leaving -- I feel like we have to close the chapter, to see him going in flesh and blood," she said.

"Saddam Hussein has gone, Tony Blair and the last one will be (US President George W.) Bush."

Mahoney, 44, travelled down on a bus late last night from the city of Carlisle, in northern England, near the Scottish border.

She has brought a small bottle of champagne with her and says she will pop the cork when Blair drives out of Downing Street to bid farewell to Queen Elizabeth II.

Asked if his departure would allow her to move on, she said: "It will to a degree, but I'll never get over it and it won't be gone until all the troops are back."

She added: "I'm hoping that Gordon Brown will be stronger and not let Bush dictate."

Further up Downing Street, a group of women from six families who lost sons and husbands in Iraq mounted a noisy protest outside Blair's office, taunting him to come out and talk to them about the conflict.

"You can't even walk outside your front door, let alone run a country," one woman shouted.

When, after five minutes of raucous slogans, police asked the women to desist, another chimed in: "We've been asked to get down because Blair obviously hasn't got the bottle to have democracy in his own country."

At one point during the protest, a curtain in the premier's residence seemed to twitch.

But a removal van parked outside was a reminder that soon, it may well be another man who faces the wrath of families of the war dead.

British press divided over how history will judge Blair

AFP, London

British newspapers were divided yesterday in describing how history will judge Tony Blair between those who saw a prime minister who changed the face of Britain, and those who saw one with enormous potential to effect change but eventually failed to do so.

Some gave him the thumbs-up for the post of the so-called Middle East Quartet's envoy to the region, amid rampant speculation that he is set to be offered the position.

Blair was set to officially step down as British prime minister Wednesday, after more than a decade in office, to make way for his successor Gordon Brown, who has been Blair's finance minister since 1997.

The Sun tabloid, Britain's best-read daily, said in its editorial column that, "Love him or loathe him -- and there are plenty on both sides -- this PM has given Britain a genuine

lift in ten years at Number 10 (Downing Street)."

"He has transformed the political landscape and forced the Tories to up their game," the paper said of the man it has backed in each of the past three general elections.

The Daily Telegraph, a traditional backer of the opposition Conservatives, was less positive in its assessment of Blair's decade, describing him as a leader who "promised so much and has, in truth, delivered so little."

"No leader of any political stripe has taken office with such a powerful mandate, such overwhelming popular approval. Yet how carelessly he squandered the opportunity to effect real change," the paper's editorial read.

The paper wished Blair well in his Middle East endeavours "in the hope that he leaves a more lasting legacy in that troubled region than he has managed here."

The Daily Mail, a right-wing paper that has long been a critic of Blair's Labour party, was even less subtle in its criticism of the outgoing leader, describing his time in office as "a story of hopes dashed and promise unfulfilled in a decade of unparalleled prosperity -- the work of Gordon Brown, not Mr Blair -- in which so much could have been achieved."

"No, we are not sorry to see him go. Today the rebuilding can begin."

On the subject of Blair's potential future role as Middle East envoy to the Quartet -- the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia -- the Daily Mirror, a Labour-supportive tabloid, gave a qualified endorsement for Blair.

In an editorial headlined, "Right man for the job?", the Mirror said that former US president Bill Clinton may have been a better choice for the job as "even our moderate Arab allies say that Mr Blair's credibility in the region is

in pieces."

It added, however, that Blair's "brilliant efforts in Northern Ireland have proved that he can negotiate the impossible."

"If Mr Blair can use his communicative skills and persuasive charm to bring the fragments of this blighted region together for a real and lasting peace, then he will find a true place in history."

The Times, however, dismissed suggestions that Britain's troubles in Iraq have hurt Blair's credibility in the Middle East, describing the suggestion as "nonsense."

"What matters is that an envoy commands the confidence of the major powers sponsoring him, that he is familiar with the problems on the ground, and that both (Israeli Prime Minister) Ehud Olmert and (Palestinian president) Mahmud Abbas are prepared to work with him," the paper said in an editorial.

"Mr Blair is thus well qualified."