Blair the Peacemaker and Other Bad Jokes

FARAH GHUZNAVI

These are strange times indeed. For those who enjoy black humour, there is much fodder to be had; personally, I prefer my humour light, and I'm finding it increasingly difficult to find much to laugh about. Take the recent change of guard at the highest level of British politics: well before Gordon Brown finally achieved his long-delayed entry into Downing Street, the outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair had already begun manoeuvring towards his new life as an international diplomat. For those who had just heaved a sigh of relief at Blair's departure from Downing Street, that relief proved to be short-lived. He overcame Russia's reservations, to be made Middle East envoy on behalf of the Quartet i.e. the US, Russia, the EU and the UN. Given his less-than-shining record of activity in the Middle East, this seems more than a little strange!



Tony Blair

While his official remit will be to promote Palestinian economic development and advise on building the institutions of a future Palestinian state, there are widespread reservations about Blair's ability to act as an honest broker in the Middle East not least because of his unflinching support for every excess of the Bush administration, as well as his failure to call for an end to the Israeli bombing of Lebanon last year. The fact that senior United Nations officials have attempted to present Mr. Blair as "a star player who will bring energy to the Middle East peace process" says more about the lapdog personality of the current Secretary General of the UN than it does about any talents that Mr. Blair might have.

All this raises the question of *why* Tony Blair has in fact been selected as Middle East envoy. While the situation for the Palestinians is incredibly dire because of the recent infighting between Fatah and Hamas, Blair's school of thought presents this as a "new opportunity for peace in the Middle East" (presumably by following a "divide and rule" approach…) In a nutshell, while the wider world is increasingly desperate to see some signs of progress towards an enduring settlement in the Middle East, there are a number of (not very well) hidden agendas at play here.

President Bush urgently needs to be seen to be taking some positive action after his foreign policy disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan; similarly, the Israeli Prime Minister is looking for some achievement to com pensate for his Lebanese fiasco with Hezbollah. As for the rest of the Quartet, the EU's desire for a settlement reflects its current leadership, which includes Nicolas Sarkozy of France (who is not warmly inclined towards Muslims *anywhere*) and Angela Merkel of Germany (who clearly just wants them to go away and stop bothering the rest of Europe). The unheard-of pliancy of the UN is self-evident, and Russia is battling to reclaim its status as a world power--all these factors contribute to an international drive for some kind of imposed solution in the Middle East, however unfair it might be to the Palestinians.

And in essence, this is what makes Tony Blair so attractive as a choice for the post of Middle East envoy. While the last incumbent James Wolfensohn resigned from the job because he was frustrated in his attempts to promote measures to make Palestine a viable state or to obtain a real commitment from Israel to the much-discussed "two-state solution", Blair will not be deterred by a lack of substantive progress. After all, he has always been stronger on rhetoric than concrete achievements! And his loyalties cannot be disguised by any amount of wordplay, since he is known to be a particularly "close friend" of Israel, as he was described by Jerusalem upon his retirement. In the words of one commentator "The West wants a short-term solution on its and Israel's terms and, in Tony Blair, they have a man after their own desires." (UK Independent)