

The seeds of destruction are baked into all governments from the beginning. The trick for a great leader is to think strategically and to be lucky – and to have the instinct to turn events to your advantage, as Tony Blair did

That's what Machiavelli can teach us

By Jonathan Powell

The reaction to the welter of books on the Blair years over the past few months demonstrates one thing clearly: although he left office more than three years ago, Tony Blair still stirs strong emotions. On the one hand, his autobiography was panned by angry reviewers from right and left for both style and content, and its launch was disrupted by demonstrations. On the other, the book flew off the shelves as the punters bought it in quantities they had bought no previous political biography. Everyone, it seems, still has a strong opinion about Blair.

In part because of these turbulent emotions, it is far too soon for a considered assessment of his time in government. And what has been written so far is the raw material for future histories rather than history itself. In 20 years' time, judgements on the Iraq war and public service reform will look very different. It is, however, not too early to start trying to draw lessons from the experience of those ten years in No 10.

When I was Blair's chief of staff in Downing Street, I longed for a handbook on how to govern. There are many excellent books on the theory of government, but almost none on the practice. In fact, when I came to look for one, pretty much the only thing to hand was *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli, written more than 500 years ago. When I decided to explore the lessons

I had learned from my time in No 10, I sought to establish whether Machiavelli's rules still apply in modern politics by testing them against the evidence in my diaries from 1997 to 2007.

Machiavelli is misunderstood. The description "Machiavellian" became an insult in the 16th century and has remained one ever since. But, in fact, Machiavelli was not at all "Machiavellian" as the word is understood. He was not amoral; nor was he devious or evil. He was simply the first to escape the prison of the idealised Augustinian universe and to describe things as they were rather than as we wish them to be. He derived the rules he set down in *The Prince* from his own experience in government and diplomacy and from his reading of the classics. He concluded that there was such a thing as the art of government, and that it is not the same as personal morality because individual interest and collective interest are not always the same.

Naturally, some of Machiavelli's lessons, such as how to raise a siege, are no longer relevant, but one that is still pertinent is his observation that rulers who live by myths "are more likely to destroy than to save" themselves. It relates to modern life because British politics is riddled with myths such as the notion of "cabinet government", propagated by a group of retired

mandarins who claim there used to be a system in which all important decisions were taken around the cabinet table after full discussion neatly summed up by the chairman, or prime minister, as *primus inter pares*.

This ideal system was destroyed by Blair's introduction of "sofa government", in which decisions were taken by the prime minister alone or with a huddle of cronies. It is a delicious irony that this criticism is made largely by the likes of Robin Butler, a mandarin who served Margaret Thatcher closely as cabinet secretary. Thatcher was a prime minister not renowned for the close attention she paid to the views of her cabinet colleagues.

The golden age to which these mandarins point was the 1970s, when cabinet meetings lasted days rather than hours. They did so, however, not because ministers were having detailed and evidence-based policy discussions, but because the Labour Party was ideologically split and the two sides were slugging it out at the cabinet table. Nor are the 1970s, an era irretrievably associated with the fictional *Yes Minister* characters James Hacker and Sir Humphrey Appleby, synonymous with British success. ▶

► If you think about the matter even fleetingly you will conclude that the reason such a system never existed is that it would be a singularly bad way to make decisions. A meeting of 25 people, many of whom know nothing about the subject under discussion, may be the right place to ratify conclusions politically and express collective responsibility, but it is not the right place to decide on complex points of policy. That should be done with the right people in the room, with time at their disposal and with all the evidence before them. It does not matter if the participants sit on a sofa or round a coffin-shaped table, as long as they have the chance to challenge the proposals and as long as their joint decisions are recorded and implemented.

I concede that not all the decisions taken while Blair was prime minister were right. But to pretend that this was because of process and because people with grand-sounding titles weren't in the room at the time is an extremely dangerous myth that risks gravely misleading successor governments. In fact, the difference is not between cabinet government and no cabinet government at all, but between weak and strong prime ministers. Each time a weaker prime minister succeeds a strong one, he invariably promises that he is going to reintroduce cabinet government because he is not able to set the agenda by himself.

Machiavelli's conclusions about the necessary attributes for leadership also still hold good. For him, the essential qualities were courage and intelligence. By the latter he meant not intellectual pyrotechnics so much as emotional intelligence. He proved his rules by citing examples from his own time, but they can also be illustrated by contrasting the leadership styles of Blair and Gordon Brown. Courage in politics is demonstrated by the ability to take difficult decisions and to resist the politician's natural desire to pander to powerful constituencies. Machiavelli is deeply critical of his old boss Piero Soderini, ruler of Florence, who, when confronted with problems, intellectualised, resisted when he should have yielded and gave way when he should have resisted. He argues that such irresolute princes, to escape immediate



Centres of power: Jonathan Powell (far left) walks with Prescott and Blair to a cabinet meeting, March 2007

danger, commonly follow the neutral path, in most cases to their own destruction.

That was certainly the outcome of Brown's very public agonising over whether or not to call an election at his first party conference as leader in 2007. By contrast, Blair's boldness in taking on Clause Four at his first conference as leader in 1994 led the British people to look at the party in a new light and resulted in three successive election victories for New Labour. There is, of course, such a thing as being so bold as to be foolhardy. You want your leader to be a judicious mixture of confidence and fear. But Machiavelli wisely concludes that if you have to choose, it is better to have an impetuous leader than a terminally cautious and indecisive one.

As for emotional intelligence, the critics have misinterpreted Blair's references to it in his autobiography. This is not a matter of the soft skills of being nice to people or good on television. It's about political instincts. Opinion polling is useful to political leaders in telling

them what people did think, but no use at all in telling them what people will think. For that, you need to have instincts. Some leaders have perfect pitch, as Blair demonstrated in the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997; others have a tin ear, as Brown showed during his notorious encounter with Gillian Duffy in Rochdale during the May 2010 general election campaign.

The power of Machiavelli's maxims was illustrated not just by our success when we followed them in government, but also by the terrible consequences when we failed to follow them. Machiavelli is absolutely clear that princes can never live secure in their property so long as there live others who think they have been deprived of it. He criticises Soderini for telling his friends that there were ambitious men in Florence who were against him, which justified getting rid of them, but never making up his mind to do so. Soderini made the mistake of thinking he could extinguish their malevolence

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by patience and goodness, and failed to realise that thwarted ambition cannot be required by time, nor placated by gifts. Having provided Tony with such good advice on how to handle Gordon – advice that we failed to follow – Machiavelli also offered sound advice for Gordon on how he should behave as dauphin:

... if such claimants don't have sufficient force to make war openly they should use every endeavour to acquire the Prince's friendship and be obsequious to his wishes, enjoying the Prince's good fortune when he does and leaving yourself ample opportunity to fulfil your intentions in due course.

If only Gordon had followed this counsel, had supported Tony's reform programme and waited patiently, he would have been able to succeed to the leadership smoothly and the Labour Party would not have been damaged irreparably by the constant destabilisation from 2004 onwards.

Machiavelli's thinking can be applied to any prime minister to establish whether they understand the art of government. It is a little too early to try to judge David Cameron, but he has already followed some of Machiavelli's advice to his advantage and ignored other rules to his peril. He has begun by being bold, taking difficult decisions early while he is strong in the hope of reaping the benefit before the next election, rather than trying to introduce tough measures just before he has to face the electorate again. He has cleverly managed expectations on cuts by making them sound blood-curdling in advance when, in fact, being spread over four years, they will not be as bad as people fear. He followed a clear, 100-day plan after his election, and was as ruthless as Machiavelli would have advised him to be in dealing with David Laws, his first chief secretary to the Treasury, and in jettisoning unpopular Conservative policies after the formation of the coalition with the

Liberal Democrats. However, as so often with new governments, having completed the 100-day plan, his team has collapsed in exhaustion. Machiavelli is clear that a prince must think strategically and have each new step prepared before the last is completed. If not, he will find himself the victim of events.

It is not at all clear if Cameron has a plan to deal with the unrest that will follow the cuts, as Margaret Thatcher did with the miners, or whether he will be as unprepared as Ted Heath was. He appears to have allowed himself to be captured by the civil service using the excuse of the coalition to introduce bureaucratic processes for agreeing all policy. A series of crises has filled the vacuum thus created. For those of us who lived through 1997 in Downing Street, it is déjà vu all over again, seeing another government in its first year with the Foreign Secretary embroiled in a sex scandal, damaging leaks about the defence review and the Prime Minister defending a spin doctor who has become the story.

The seeds of destruction are baked into all governments from the beginning. The trick is to identify them then, rather than in the final few months. It is harder to say where Cameron's lie, though I would guess the over-emphasis on politics at the expense of policy is likely to be one. The most dangerous threat, and the one that brings down all governments in the end, is hubris. Unlike leaders of most other countries, our prime ministers do not live in luxury. They have to do their own cooking and cleaning and don't have official photographers following them around. But they cannot live normal lives. There is always someone to open the door. If they go to the theatre they have to slip into their seat after the lights have gone down, in order to avoid the fate of Abraham Lincoln. They cannot go for a stroll in the park on their own and are always surrounded by the unnatural quiet of Downing Street, more stately home than modern office. It is impossible in such circumstances to remain in touch indefinitely, though it helps to have small children around to prick the aura of specialness. Because of that, we now have de facto term limits in Britain, even if we don't have

them enshrined in the constitution, as in the United States. Prime ministers simply can't stay in office more than ten years if they want to leave on their own terms. If they try to go on and on like Thatcher, they are ejected, either by the electorate or by their party.

To be great, leaders need to have what Machiavelli called *fortuna*. But luck is not enough by itself. Machiavelli says that ultimately it is their own merit that enables great leaders to recognise the opportunities that *fortuna* presents. In the past hundred years, there has been only a handful of prime ministers who combined luck and the instinct to turn it to their advantage.

There is such a thing as the art of government, and it is worth studying

Blair was one such leader, even if people don't recognise it now. He changed British politics fundamentally and shifted its centre of gravity. New Labour now may be pronounced dead, but it is worth remembering that it never lost an election. It will be back under a different name and different leaders, and Labour will start winning elections again only when, once again, it dominates the centre of politics.

Both Machiavelli and Blair were misunderstood. I am probably 500 years too late to rehabilitate Machiavelli, and 20 years too early to ensure a more balanced assessment of Tony Blair. But I hope that people in power will at least think of Machiavelli's teaching and challenge the myths with which our system is riddled. Leaders seek office to change the way things are through their ideology and beliefs. Yet they won't be able to achieve any of their objectives unless they realise, as Machiavelli did, that there is such a thing as the art of government, and that it is worth studying. ●

Jonathan Powell served as Tony Blair's chief of staff from 1997-2007. His book "The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World" is newly published by the Bodley Head (£20)

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