

# Devine Retribution in No Old Country for Men

Michael Coyne

‘Sir – These are the nation’s representatives. Now, some of them come to Parliament in the hope that they might serve their country. But most of them, being human, are here to fill their pockets.’

– Charles James Fox (Jim Carter) in *The Madness of King George* (directed by Nicholas Hytner, 1994, screenplay by Alan Bennett, based on his play *The Madness of George III*)

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‘The people are excluded from forming judgement on various matters of public interest on the ground that expert knowledge is required, and that of course the people cannot possess. . . . The debunking of the expert is an important stage in the history of democratic communities because democracy involves the assertion of the common against the special interest.’

Aneurin Bevan, 1938

In Autumn 2005, I wrote an article for *The Drouth* arguing the case for republicanism. I pointed out that the constituency in which I lived had just held a by-election (occasioned by the death of Robin Cook), and I lamented the absence of an openly and specifically republican candidate in a field of ten hopefuls – which even included a contender from the wonderfully named ‘Alliance for Change – Britain in Sin’. The winner of that election was, as expected, the Labour candidate, Jim Devine. Up until this year, a Labour candidate was virtually guaranteed victory in West Lothian’s Westminster elections, but not any more. Now I have no idea what the erstwhile standard-bearer of ‘Alliance for Change – Britain in Sin’ might think of these recent shenanigans over MPs’ expenses claims, but the consensus in West Lothian is that Jim Devine would have been set for life in a safe seat had the revelations about his claims for rewiring and shelving never emerged.

I come from a long line of Labour voters. My father was a Labour councillor for thirty-three years, until he stepped down at the age of fifty-five in 1986. To this day he’s a staunch Labour supporter, although in terms of Labour party history, he’s two generations back: neither ‘New Labour’ nor ‘Militant Tendency’, but ‘Old

Labour’ – or, as his friend the late Harry Ewing once defined him, ‘Real Labour’. I myself used to vote Labour in parliamentary elections up to and including 1997. In the urgent need to eject the Tories from power, to my everlasting regret I squandered my franchise by helping install Tony Blair in Downing Street.

I had admired Robin Cook’s stance over Iraq, but I did not vote for him in 2005. Under the pitiful, paltry, perniciously indirect voting system that guises as democracy in these islands, a vote for Robin Cook was a vote for the Labour party, and a vote for the Labour party was a vote for Tony Blair. Puny though the individual’s democratic participation may be, I chose not to demean it further by endorsing the government that dragged this country into an unjust and immoral war. Come Jim Devine’s turn at the bat, I did not vote for him, either, having long perceived that Labour isn’t part of the solution but, indeed, part of the problem.

I’ve met Jim Devine on a couple of occasions, a generation apart. In 1982, he fired off a witticism at my expense, which I still consider funny. We crossed paths on the day of the 1982 local elections, when I let fly with a particularly un-PC barb (a double-whammy I



won't repeat here), prompting his reply that that was some way for the son of a socialist to be talking! A mutual friend in attendance informed Jim that I was not a socialist but, in fact, an admirer of Ronald Reagan (which, before his too-close alliance with Thatcher, the honorary knighthood, and the ramifications of selecting George Bush, Snr as his Vice-President became clear, indeed I was). Jim Devine's response was hilarious: 'That's just attention-seeking behaviour, that is!'

In 2006 I encountered him by chance *en route* to conducting his MP's surgery. I asked him how he was enjoying being at Westminster. He said he'd never expected it and certainly never wanted it to happen under such tragic circumstances, but it was a great honour to be there. Given that I have the same reverence for government as your average Montana backwoodsman, I had to restrain myself from asking, 'Is it?' Still, I did have one query for him, though I expect he'd heard it a thousand times since becoming an MP. I recall the precise phraseology was 'When are you boys going to get rid of this clown who's dragged us into Iraq?'

Jim Devine made sympathetic 'I know, I know' noises, and no doubt there must be more than a few who've wondered how far the greatly-anticipated rosy, cosy future on the US lecture circuit might not have been only reward, but perhaps even some inspiration? 'I was your pal when everyone else was against you.' Would star-spangled fat-cats pay ten thousand dollars a plate for such dressed-up drivel, enabling the orator to pick up a cool two hundred and fifty thousand bucks a speech? A few weeks of that would make anyone a multi-millionaire! Not that anyone could possibly attribute such base concerns to the architect of Britain's reckless adventurism in Iraq. Jim Devine assured me of Blair's utterly sincere belief in his course of action. He'd been in meetings with him and it was obvious Blair was acting out of genuine conviction. He did add, 'It's delusional'; to

which I reminded him that thousands upon thousands had died to buttress that delusion.

It was possibly unfair or unreasonable – and certainly unrealistic – to expect that a recently-elected politician would openly challenge the ensconced leader of his party. That sort of thing usually happens only in novels (I ought to know; I once wrote one of those). But it is symptomatic of the huge and, I fear, eternal disconnection of democracy in this country that a new MP and doubtless many of his colleagues may easily recognize the folly of an obscene and unnecessary conflict, but nothing could be done about it, because one preening messianic fantasist prevailed. The expenses scandal that unravelled Devine's parliamentary career – and deserves to derail a good many others besides – is yet another instance of this endemic disconnection.



While Blair is passionately convinced of God's eventual kindly judgement, he continues to hedge bets by reaping lucrative earthly rewards – having improved this execrable Parliament by departing from it. By contrast, Jim Devine's political undoing has come courtesy of the smallest of potatoes. It calls to mind a 1968 Democratic party ad ridiculing the vice-presidential candidacy of Spiro Agnew: 'This would be funny if it weren't so serious. It would be serious if it weren't so funny.' Devine did some good things in his short time as an MP, notably his campaign on behalf of the families who lost out in the Farepak débâcle. But he's finished in national politics. The idea that he may stand as an independent at the next election is ill-advised.

If, say, Tam Dalyell had been so disgusted by the 2003 invasion of Iraq that he had decided to quit the Labour party and force a by-election, putting himself forward as an independent candidate, he would've had an excellent chance of victory. But Devine has not enjoyed Tam Dalyell's political longevity, nor does he have his huge personal following or his



esteemed reputation as a maverick. It's quite likely that voters in the Livingston constituency did not so much vote for Devine in September 2005 as for Robin Cook (whose election agent Devine was) *in absentia*. He won because he was Labour's selected candidate. Cut him loose from that, and he has no chance. Electoral returns on his prospective independent candidacy would be more likely to result in personal embarrassment than in his political vindication. Best fold the tent and go quietly.

That leaves a seat more or less up for grabs at the next election. So strong is the public's contempt for MPs involved in this expenses scandal that a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity beckons for anti-politicians.

Now for an exclusive revelation! Just a few weeks ago, I even entertained the idea of becoming a candidate myself. I soon talked myself out of this silliness. For one thing, I doubt I'd have the temperament for it. For another, I've too much disdain for the existing system and don't believe 'If you can't beat them, join them'. And let's not forget the teensy-weensy little detail that, without any form of proportional representation, the deck is incontrovertibly stacked against individuals who dare to run on an independent platform. I probably wouldn't have liked it, anyway. Minor ego-trip over, Livingston still needs an MP – and ideally a good one.

Although Jim Devine's self-induced misfortunes might have imperilled what would otherwise be a sure-fire Labour stronghold, Labour has the potential to nominate a truly outstanding candidate in Bathgate councillor John McGinty. McGinty has sat on West Lothian Council for the last ten years, has earned a fine reputation on behalf of his constituents – and possesses a particular political virtue that is wholly admirable at any time but in the current climate is as precious as gold dust. Every year, McGinty's expenses claim has been zero. West Lothian voters like their MPs above reproach, and John McGinty would be an ideal choice.

Still, it is undoubtedly too much to hope that the next election will yield six hundred and fifty MPs of John McGinty's calibre. While I am hopeful that my own constituency might elect a good representative, I've no faith whatsoever that an agenda of reform, to which many MPs are currently paying lip-service, will meaningfully prevail at Westminster. That system of privilege is too self-protective and self-perpetuating to be successfully challenged.

This is an old country with an antiquated political system, which is long-past its use-by date (choose any one of the last few centuries), but it stubbornly refuses to go forward, as if no more progress were needed after a so-called Glorious so-called Revolution of 1688, or that Act of Union in 1707.

Yes, I recall a few reforms scattered through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But let's face facts: 'This is the way we've always done things' is the pathetic mantra of apologists for a constitution which isn't worth the paper it's not written on – an arrangement that suits the powers-that-be perfectly. It is much easier to shift the goalposts to your own advantage when the rules are not written down, and only you know what they are – and, by coincidence, they are what you say they are. This same political emasculation has prolonged the deplorably indirect excuse for 'democracy' by which selection of a Prime Minister is *still* not part of every individual voter's franchise; by which the electorate can't directly remove Prime Ministers who have long outstayed their welcome, or at least look forward to an independently set date by which said Prime Minister must be held to public account; and by which voters are effectively held in no higher regard than sheep, to be massaged, manoeuvred and manipulated by any occupant of 10 Downing Street, who may call an election at a point best designed to benefit his own political interests. These aren't the hallmarks of a confident, forward-looking democracy. They are inherently emasculating and deeply patronizing tactics, no doubt originally designed by brigands who considered themselves to be our 'betters', and now conveniently retained by a long line of control freaks, to keep an increasingly apathetic populace (that is, up until the Iraq war and now the expenses scandal) suspended between ignorance and impotence. We are not sheep, and we are not guileless children – and we deserve a more direct say in this political system than any politician I've heard has ever deemed fit to propose. Yes, this is an old country. But until our 'leaders' credit us with some semblance of political maturity and independent-minded intelligence, it will remain no old country for men.

I must contend, therefore, that this disconnection of democracy is an in-built and almost inevitable hazard of the UK's electoral system. A poor electoral system can't help but produce a poor political system, composed largely of individuals who can only aspire to the second-rate, and the expenses scandal is



merely emblematic of contempt for the public weal, far from the only recent example of political high-handedness.

A few cases in point. The run-up to the 2005 election saw millions of voters evidently outraged by the war in Iraq, yet the morning after the vote, Tony Blair was still in 10 Downing Street. Now that's surely another good illustration of the 'democratic disconnect' thrown up by this electoral system, but let's look at it on the individual level. Labour's

parliamentary majority in this unprecedented third term was sizeable yet significantly slashed. Tony Blair, devout humble Christian that he is – and never one to shy from reminding us all of his devotion, his humility, his Christianity – stood on the steps of Downing Street, took cognizance of his reduced

majority and declared, 'I've listened and I've learned.' In spite of the widespread indignation over Iraq, British troops remained there until 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009. One day short of six years since George Bush pranced on the deck of the *USS Abraham Lincoln* beneath the banner proclaiming 'Mission Accomplished'. Six days short of four years since Blair assured us that he had listened and he had learned. And a few weeks before that election, Blair's government had suffered a humiliating setback when Tories, Liberal Democrats and the Lords all joined forces to defeat the loathsome scheme for ID cards. Yet less than a week after Blair promised us all on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2005 that New Labour was now the party of New Listening and New Learning, ID cards were back centrally on the government's agenda! To whom had he listened? What had he learned?

Systemic decadence certainly provides fertile ground for a government removed from, and often at odds with, the people's best interests. Individual hubris is lethal to the mix. The past

fifteen years of Labour party history have been dominated by the playground alliance-enmity of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – a relationship which highlights the puerility, pusillanimity and putrescence of the British political system. It's tragic that John Smith died long before his time, thus depriving this country of a decent Prime Minister, but it's perhaps also regrettable that he never took the trouble to bang two egotists' heads together and tell them the running of the country was not all about *them*. Puerile? By now, the world has had its bellyful

of printed commentary on the near-fratricidal relationship of these two prima donnas. Still, I will take this opportunity to reproduce my all-time favourite here, in its entirety. From *The Star*, on Brown becoming Prime Minister: 'Tony Out, Gordon In, Blah, Blah, Whatever.' I, for one, missed the part where it made any real difference.

Okay, let's be fair and admit that Brown didn't have any kind of a

honeymoon. His first full day in office, three British soldiers were killed in Iraq (and he passed up the chance to pull British troops out there and then, boxing it off as Tony Blair's war). His second day, there's a terrorist attack in London; and on the third, there's another at Glasgow airport, catapulting John Smeaton into the limelight. But, hey, you want to be Prime Minister, you're basically asserting you can handle whatever crises might emerge; there's the rub.

I said the Blair-Brown relationship highlighted the pusillanimity and the putrescence of the British political system. What did I mean by that? In a healthy, mature democracy, it should never be up to a Prime Minister or (God hasten the day, but spare us the current cast of characters!) President to determine the date of his departure or, indeed, who ought to be his successor. Blair was elected to serve a third term. Although I despise all that he represents I believe he should have devoted his energies to the job he was elected to do. From the



time he hinted he wouldn't serve his full term, the focus of political debate in the UK swung away from policy to the chatterati's obsession with personality, toward when Blair might leave and Brown would take over. So once again, Tony Blair, armed with his delusions about celebrity status, made it all about *him*.

Notably, one of the best commentators on Blair's self-importance at this juncture was Jim Devine. Given that the day after a UK general election, a defeated British Prime Minister is out on the street and the leader of the victorious party walks straight into Downing Street (with no American-style transition period), why did Blair require a six-week farewell tour of the globe (which Devine likened to one of Frank Sinatra's gigs), if not to convince himself the world still loved him, and would really miss him? Wasn't it a character from *Monty Python's Life of Brian* who announced: 'He's *not* the Messiah! He's a very naughty boy!?' But if Blair didn't need six weeks in the wings before he came to power, why did he need six weeks of strutting around the globe before he gave it up? Because it was about ego and the wider world, but not about Britain.

And so it came to pass that, verily, Gordon Brown descended on the office of Prime Minister. He who loves Britain so much that he has always dreamed of being Prime Minister. He who, it seems, distrusts the people of Britain so much that he is afraid to call an election for fear that they will vote him out, as they never voted him in. There's no doubt of Brown's personal probity, but he's something of a tragic figure, the classic example of 'be careful what you wish for, because you might get it.' Brown may yet ponder Truman Capote's observation that more tears are shed over answered prayers than over those left unanswered. He is a man with a brilliant future behind him, whom I suspect may even now harbour dreams of being the Prime Minister of a Britain that no longer exists except in the nostalgic-romantic imagination. Hence his desperate lunge to embrace a false national consensus, which reached an ugly nadir in his chumminess with Margaret Thatcher. The Labour voters in his Fife constituency (where once upon a time, there was a mining industry) must have loved that! Old Labour loyalists who still have faith in Brown – of whom my father is one – are, I'd suggest, attracted to what he purports to represent rather than the facts of his performance in high office.

This is a man who might have mounted a successful challenge to Blair in 2003, when war loomed in Iraq. Instead, he sat on his hands, except when signing the cheques for this specious crusade for the glory of Bush and Blair (surely the most obnoxious alliterative double act since Leopold and Loeb). When Brown put up National Insurance by 1% in early Summer of that year, how many wondered if this was how Britain intended to fund the war in Iraq? How far is the pensions crisis due to the then-Chancellor of the Exchequer utilizing pensions money to finance other government programmes between 1997 and 2002? And please let us not forget the current global recession, which ten years of Labour's economic policies with guess who as Chancellor helped to bring about. Britain, we're told, will be virtually the last developed country to emerge from this recession. But we're expected to believe that Gordon Brown, as one of the people who got us into this mess, is the very best man to get us out? You cannot take credit for ten years of good times but, when it all goes pear-shaped, point to the global downturn due to similar economic policies and absolve yourself of responsibility. Where have you heard it before?: 'It wisnae me, mister! A big boy did it and then ran away!'

Brown has his problems in government, and these are not all self-inflicted. Yet, in his own way, he is as guilty of the 'democratic disconnect' as his predecessor, as recent events have shown. On 8<sup>th</sup> June this year Brown saw off a potential rebellion from Labour MPs who wish to see him resign from the leadership. He put up a strong fight, convincing the majority of his party's MPs that he was the one equipped to deliver open, transparent and accountable government. Exactly one week later, Brown announced there would be a new inquiry into the war in Iraq – behind closed doors. Now, Britain needs another closed-door inquiry into Iraq like Julius Caesar needs another stab-wound. In the wake of public discontent Brown eventually had to back-pedal on this, so the inquiry will now be more open than initially conceived – if, cynics might suspect, despite recent assurances, inevitably less so than widely desired. The point is not that Brown was willing to accommodate the popular will, but that his first instinct was to thwart it by going for a safe, 'Establishment-friendly' option. Just look at the people he has selected for the panel. Too much to hope for the inclusion of a Rose Gentle or a Reg Keys or a George Galloway (an MP who, by the way, claims zero



in expenses). But Brown really surpassed himself on this one! Four knights and a baroness, one of whom has already gone on record comparing Bush and Blair to FDR and Churchill. Significantly, Brown's cabinet is heavily weighted with titled nonentities – Lord This and Lady That. This is a 'government of all the talents'? I think not. The only one seemingly absent is Lady Godiva – doubtless omitted because she really would be too transparent.

What might this tell us? It tells me that when push comes to shove, this great socialist champion of the ordinary working man does not, in fact, trust the people. I suspected as much when he recoiled from the opportunity to validate his premiership at the polls. His restrictive, 'aristocratic' appointments for this Iraq inquiry confirm it beyond doubt. Of course Brown is far from alone among Labour leaders cosying up to an Establishment that never really changes. The UK has had six Labour Prime Ministers, but perhaps only one presided over a genuinely radical government. The Attlee years gave us the National Health Service, which is Britain's true crowning glory. Having excoriated British governments, past and present, for so much, it is only fair that I assert just as fervently that the NHS was one thing the British got absolutely right. But: if we didn't have an NHS right now, would the current Labour government deliver one? Brown, to be fair, would go for it – but he'd be besieged by neo-liberal thugs in suits anxious to impress upon him why such an ideal health service wouldn't be practical in this current (or any other) climate. The Labour party has lost its way, chiefly because of the ascendancy of New Labour in the 1990s. But this last half-century has seen too many Labour big-hitters, from arch-royalist Speaker of the House George Thomas to Tony Blair – or, put another way, from Tonypandy to Andy Pandy – who deem nothing wrong with the Establishment as long as they're on the inside looking out. It's just

too bad no-one ever told them – Britain already *has* a Conservative party.

Speaking of which, a few weeks ago David Cameron bemoaned the expenses scandal, proclaiming that the highest ethical standards should be expected of our MPs, considering that they hoped to rule us one day. And there, even although trying to make the right noises, we have the 'democratic disconnect' distilled into one single word. We don't expect any of you to 'rule', mate. We expect you to serve. The fact that too many of our politicians aspire to 'rule' is a huge part of the problem with this country's political system. In a democracy, government should be the tool of the people. People should never be tools of the government.



I'm not sure that the Conservative party are the best ones to get that message, let alone deliver it. I *am* sure I will never vote for them. Margaret Thatcher gloried in libertarian rhetoric while presiding over an authoritarian government, in which 'People Power' was welcomed – as long as it was happening in Eastern Europe. The 'democratic disconnect' under Thatcher is not so much a topic as an epic, and thus best left for another occasion. In the meantime, it is significant that a Labour MP gets hung out to dry for something as petty as shelving and rewiring while Tory MPs have made truly outrageous expenses claims for aristocratic frippery such as moat-cleaning and duck-houses. There is, of course, the general, and inaccurate, consensus that 'they're all at it'. Neither true nor fair, but now an MP, unlike 'a working-class hero', is not 'something to be'. The corrosive expenses scandal isn't entirely Labour's fault; however, it is wholly Labour's tragedy.

Perhaps some Tory MPs, having acclimatized themselves to that hierarchical culture of privileged entitlement enjoyed since public school, were arrogant enough to think that the



Commons' expenses claims system was just an extension of their gentlemen's club lifestyle. But most people expected better of Labour. Labour was the party that was supposed to fight for the interests of ordinary working people – the altruistic party. Yet the greatest mavericks have either quit the party in disgust at New Labour (George Galloway), or retired (Tony Benn, Tam Dalyell), or both (Dennis Canavan). Now, more than ever, the Labour party needs new blood of their calibre. What it doesn't need is another influx of bland, ten-a-penny corporate careerists, prowling the corridors of Westminster in search of headlines, advancement and a cosy Establishment berth.

This expenses scandal mushroomed largely because of New Labour's love affair with corporatism. When Brown bailed out the banks, the people were outraged that individuals like 'Fred the Shred' Goodwin should continue to reap huge personal profits in the face of financial disaster bailed out by the public purse. From there, scrutiny switched to the considerable sums many MPs were claiming as expenses, again funded by Joe Taxpayer. Before we get off the topic, there ought to be a more rigorous investigation, not just of the money they earn, but of the time front-benchers, in

particular, spend pursuing second careers. Is the country so unimportant that the job of MP need be just a part-time responsibility? If they feel their MP's salary isn't enough, then leave. Go do something else. I have a rather austere solution to this conundrum. I would make a career in politics akin to the priesthood, whereby individuals entrusted with great responsibility should be recompensed modestly, with prohibition of extravagant perks and outside business interests. It's Draconian, but

might help nurture a political ethos dedicated to service and put an end to obscene self-aggrandizement.

It isn't enough to be rid of some rotten apples; we need, in systemic terms, a new barrel. We won't get that. We won't even get root-and-branch reform of this expenses system. Watered-down legislation that promises reform but delivers business as usual has already seen to that. No-one should be surprised. Labour handed the Tories this gift. And among all those great unchanging truths of the British political system, rest assured we'll still be 'ruled' by people whose unspoken mantra is: 'More carrot for me, more stick for you.'

