

Here's how it's done.



Anyone remember that bizarre period from 1994 to 1997?

There was a Dead Man Walking in Number 10, and a party squabbling in advance of what everyone knew would be a catastrophic election defeat? (How times change, eh?)

There was an opposition leader who could (such is the privilege of opposition) make carefully worded jibes and gave off a whiff of “change” and “people power” but very carefully never went into specifics?

Cameron will do for “green issues” what Blair did for “proportional representation.” Maybe less.

“The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which.”

Opposition's attractions

By Matthew Engel

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A new work by the guerrilla artist Banksy has appeared on the wall of a chemist's shop in north London. It depicts two children – hands-on-hearts, American-style – pledging allegiance to a potential new British flag: a fluttering Tesco plastic shopping bag.

Just before the painting appeared, the Daily Mail, perhaps Britain's most powerful newspaper, launched a campaign to rid the country of the estimated 13 billion free bags handed out to shoppers every year, and their associated detritus. Up to then, the government had been waffling on this subject, fearful of annoying the supermarkets, especially the mighty Tesco. Suddenly there was a response. Forced to choose between two competing baronies, the prime minister's waffle became more tortured than ever. Eventually, in this month's Budget, the government gave the supermarkets what might be a genuine ultimatum. But the Mail forced Brown into it.

The reluctance to do anything is characteristic of the government of the past 11 years, under both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Indeed, a future historian might choose Banksy's latest as a motif for the entire era.

Labour was elected in 1997, in a historic landslide, to end 18 years of increasingly weary Conservative rule. It accepted the Thatcherite economic settlement but was committed to reforming some of Thatcherism's side-effects and blindspots. But once its programmatic commitments – such as devolution to Scotland and Wales and the diversion of funds into health and education – had been fulfilled, it became increasingly incoherent and purposeless.

Intellectually adrift and pathologically frightened, the Brown government's chief objective seems to be bureaucratic convenience. Determined to force identity cards on us for reasons it cannot explain, its strategy varies between authoritarianism and stealth. Scared to raise taxes honestly to meet public need, it resorts to accounting trickery. Unable to develop an effective environmental policy, it opts for rhetoric above all else.

Who should we blame for this? I blame the other lot – the Conservative party, the opposition.

Opposition is, of course, a vital part of any democratic system. But it emerged in Britain first, and has flourished here most vigorously. The tradition can certainly be dated back to 1688, and the first wholesale switch of governing parties took place in 1782. The term "His Majesty's Opposition" first appeared in 1826.

Even now, the culture is stronger in Britain than anywhere else. Americans find opposition difficult because their political leader is also the embodiment of the state. Europeans are addicted to coalitions and consensus. The developing world cannot grasp the idea at all. Only Australian politicians have the same ability to insult each other mercilessly without losing sight of their common values.

At its worst, the British system leads to yah-boo negativity. But at its best, an opposition can perform magnificent service, highlighting incompetence and folly. Labour was superb at the job before 1997 and the late Robin Cook, then shadow foreign secretary, was the best oppositionalist of my lifetime, combining a sharp mind, hard work and superb oratory. The government was terrified of him.

The Conservatives have been useless. It has hardly helped that they have had five leaders in 11 years. The present incumbent, David Cameron, has been masterful at the headline job of insulting the prime minister in the Commons. But that's just the froth. Effective opposition means having great research teams, not just great gag-writers. I recently spent an evening listening to Michael Gove, a clever, boring man who has suddenly risen to be shadow secretary for children. Several of us were struck by the poverty of his critique of government policy. What would he do differently? After two hours, we were little wiser.

Why are the Conservatives so bad at opposing?

I can offer three possible explanations. First, their own 18 years in power have not left the public mind: they cannot, for instance, criticise the shambolic railway system, because they are still blamed for the shambles. Second, it is harder to oppose from the right than the left, especially when faced with a government such as this one whose own instincts have become increasingly rightwing. Third, the most gifted Tory politicians, shorn of power, tend to get more interested in improving their own fortunes than the nation's.

I am convinced that, had Labour been in opposition, Britain would not have joined in the Iraq war because the party would have harnessed the national surge of antipathy and made sending troops politically impossible. The Conservatives could only offer knee-jerk pro-Americanism.

A fourth Labour term would be ghastly. (Can I repeat Engel's First Law? "After eight years all governments stink.") Would the Conservatives do a better job? Questionable. Would Labour be better at opposing? Undoubtedly.