

Diana's Funeral as Defining Moment

A moment when a society defines itself or takes a new direction is not common. England had one at the Synod of Whitby and another at the Battle of Hastings. (I belong to the minority including Thomas Carlyle who take 1867 to be a third.) Can the undoing of the Norman Conquest be given a date?—the throwing-off of the aristocracy/clerisy/establishment that governed us after 1066? I have come round to the view that it is no exaggeration to nominate September 1997, and last year published some comments to that effect, remarking amongst other things on the oddity of a society that behaves as if a censorship is in force when there is no KGB.

One hesitates to plunge into a filthy-mantled pool, and I did not read the Alastair Campbell diaries when they came out. After dipping a toe I have had to modify my view of the Princess Diana month. It was not a change in collective consciousness brought about by simultaneous movements of innumerable human spirits, such as the Enlightenment is sometimes thought to be, or the rise of capitalism. It was an opportunity seized by “Downing Street”. “It was bound to be a fascinating period, and a genuinely interesting professional challenge.”¹

Alastair Campbell is of course an incarnation of the new world. He frequently rebukes the press for its obsession with trivia, but he is the perfection of the world in which they live and move and have their being. To Campbell, given the opportunity of managing the media about the divorce and remarriage of the then foreign secretary, Robin Cook “spoke somewhat in the language of another age, like he was delivering lines in a drama.”² The language of the other age was what used to be known as English. Blair/Campbell create the new language and the new world. If it may be said by a man of pure working-class upbringing, it is a world of inconceivable vulgarity, as well as triviality.

When the exciting news came through in the early hours that Princess Diana was dead, “We agreed it was fine to be emotional, and to call her the People’s Princess.”³ On the following page Campbell does get emotional: “I was tired and felt really emotional now, and drained, and started crying.” Campbell wept. God knows what the tears meant, for the idea of sincerity has been superseded. For a Labour Party Conference speech “I did the final uplifting ‘spirit of Britain’ stuff.”⁴ Scripted sincerity. On the fatal Sunday morning, the beginning of the defining moment, “TB called again, and said he felt absolutely devastated [a cliché absolutely unable to express “devastation”] . . . TB spoke to the Queen. Then he came on the TV as he and the family arrived at church. It was a very powerful piece of communication.”⁵ Communicating what? “The People’s Princess was easily the strongest line and the people in the studio . . . felt he really had caught the mood.”⁶

Did Blair–Campbell catch the mood or did they make it? Did they feel or did they invent feeling for the nation? “TB said the two things that people saw in her above all were compassion and modernity. But what was clear was that we would shape the event.”⁷ That was the constitutional revolution. What had the event to do with the Prime Minister? “The royals” did not resist. On the contrary, the people who made up the surviving British establishment did not know what to do and welcomed the transfer of power to Downing Street, a power greater than that of any thought police: to tell us what we feel. TB “felt we had to make sure the funeral was not a classic Establishment event.”⁸ He succeeded in making it the end of the classic Establishment, and read a lesson himself. “Who should be invited? Stars? Children? Someone asked if all the Lords lieutenant would be asked to the funeral and there was a fairly immediate chorus of NO. Do we invite the Al Fayeds? Yes.”⁹ WE invite, we of “Downing Street”. And we make a world in which there is no sincerity but to be “modern”. Blair spake the word “She will become an icon straight away. She will live on as an icon.”¹⁰ And lo, she became an “icon”.

Yeats comes to mind. Weasels fighting in a hole. What rough beast, its hour come round at last / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? David Sims once said to me, “I know what rough beast.”

Tougher readers of Campbell will surely be able to amplify. I shall read no more.

My comments on the resultant event are in the appendix to which this is a postscript, in my book *Untied Kingdom*.
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1 *The Blair Years: Extracts from The Alastair Campbell Diaries*, ed. Alastair Campbell and Richard Stott, 2008, p. 234

2 *Ibid.*, p. 229 3 p. 232 4 p. 474 5 p. 233 6 *Ibid.* 7 p. 235 8 p. 234 9 p. 236 10 p. 232