

UK: Gordon Brown plans exit route

Tony Blair got a made-up job in international affairs but failed to get his "international statesman" recognition that he so desperately craved. Brown has long coveted the top slot at the IMF, but didn't get it last time around. Now, he's making his bid for recognition by seeking to change the rules. And he has a degree of urgency: it's looking increasingly unlikely he will be Prime Minister after the next election - which gives him only a few months to find a lucrative berth that will also satisfy his ego.

UK Prime Minister (and, in truth, still Chancellor of the Exchequer despite that role nominally being held by Alistair Darling) Gordon Brown is preparing to leave Downing Street.

Last week in China Brown was travelling with Labour Luvvie Richard Branson who changed political allegiance as the results of the 1997 election came in. Branson is Brown's preferred bidder for Northern Rock, raising the suspicion of a pay-off for the support that Branson and his Virgin group of companies have given the the Labour Party in that 10 year period. Brown telegraphed that the loans that the British Government had advanced to Northern Rock to support it during its recent crisis would be converted into government backed bonds which would then be released to the market. In doing so, at a stroke, Brown would clean up Rock's balance sheet - and make it a much more attractive proposition for a bidder.

Today, Alistair Darling formally announced that - but he did so just as Gordon Brown started sucking up to India. His tour had moved on. India, Brown believes, is a vital strategic trade partner for the UK. Actually, there's another point: Indian businesses and their owners have been strong supporters of the Labour Party. But also, Ford has just named India's TATA group as its preferred bidder for the Jaguar / Land Rover operations. For Brown, this means that he will not be the Prime Minister that lost the UK's last mass-market mid-market car maker. His predecessor managed to lose MG-Rover, which was moving to compete with BMW and Jaguar. The Labour Party did nothing to aid MG Rover and, equally, did nothing to aid the purchase of the companies by Chinese entities.

But Brown may say the right things in China, but he feels closer to India. Maybe in part this is driven by the fact that the Chinese so comprehensively - and easily - outmanoeuvred his pal Peter Mandelson and his coterie of Labour acolytes parachuted into EU trade jobs. But mostly, it's just that there are more Indians in the UK than Chinese and he needs their votes at the forthcoming election. His own position may be all but lost but his party has some chance of success in the absence of strong opposition from any quarter.

Brown's speech in India today was a plea for personal recognition: he wants to reform the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations. What he means is that the selection process for top jobs

at the IMF and the World Bank locked him out last time and he really, really wants to run one or other of them.

In relation to the United Nations, he has no expectation of personal position - but it's a useful ploy to be able to play the developing and uncertain world card knowing that an increasing proportion of the UK's population is from the developing and uncertain world. So his statement that he supports India's claim to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council is a political statement and largely hot air.

The reason is simple: the UN has no intention of increasing the number of permanent seats. India's claim results from two things: it's massive population and its nuclear weapons. If those are valid criteria, and on that basis, India's claim is supportable then the question is whether there is a current member that deserves its place less than India.

The realistic answer to that is, if those are indeed qualifying criteria, yes. And that current member is the UK whose claim is primarily based on history. The truth is that the UK is no longer a major player in global security - under Blair it even lost its claim to be the hand of sense, which controlled the excesses of the USA, and it has lost its credibility, too, in the light of its demonstrable lack of valid intervention to protect the people of Palestine - even though Blair's made up job is supposed to be to try to reduce the problems.

Brown called on the spirit of Mahatma Ghandi - claiming to be inspired by him as he laid a wreath at the former Indian leader's tomb.

Terrifyingly, Brown also said that he did not regard the UN as the ultimate decision maker in relation to military action. Indeed, he specifically said that he would not "pledge" to always seek UN approval before undertaking such action.

Brown's desperation to be seen as an individual, strong and decisive leader might lead to his making decisions for his own purposes. Not that that's a surprise as it's been the Blair policy since 1997. But for those that thought Brown might be different, it's unwelcome news.

A year ago, Brown met his Indian counterpart to try to reduce what many saw as manufactured tension over a UK television programme in which a contestant didn't think she was being badly treated but agitators outside the programme used it as an excuse to increase racial tension. Brown was not individual, strong and decisive - he did not tell the agitators to grow up, he sided

with them. The actress at the centre of the row knew nothing of it because the programme holds its participants incommunicado but she later changed her view, saying that she had felt racially victimised - although she did not seek to play it up. Even so, she was invited to meet Tony Blair and other politicians in a media circus that was more akin to the mass kissing of babies as politicians lined up to be seen with her in the House of Commons.