MEG 84 21st June 2012

The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq – The Alastair Campbell Diaries

Alastair Campbell

John Rentoul:

I have read all of the fourth volume, I am pleased to say I have defaced and damaged the book, turned down most of the corners and scrawled in the margins. I'm not really middle class as you can tell; you're not supposed to do that to books.

But it's fascinating stuff, as you would expect because this was really the turmoil years of the Blair Government, 2001 to 2003. You've got everything from 9/11 to the Iraq War, which, of course, was the sort of turning point for Blair Government.

What is absolutely amazing reading this is that Tony Blair carried on being Prime Minister for four years after all this happened, and after he lost Alastair Campbell, who was such a huge supporter.

And there are all sorts of very important things in this, such as one of Alastair Campbell's legs is longer than the other. I don't know what that signifies but it makes running marathons pretty difficult.

But let me start by asking Alastair, if you could just tell us how you wrote this? How often did you write this? How long did you spend writing it? Was it done on the computer or was it hand written?

Alastair Campbell:
No, I did it most days, usually at the end of the day, usually – well it would depend partly on what Fiona and the kids were doing, but I'd say most days they were in bed by the time that I got home, so I'd quite often do it while Fiona was sort of asleep or complaining about the fact that I was still at Downing Street.

Sometimes if we were, its not in this bit but the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement I didn't do anything the whole time until the end when we got back. 9/11, for example, its funny how some days I did sort of feel – this sounds a little bit pompous – I did feel like this is a day in history and actually I think I should write it down.

So I remember I got back, can't even remember what time it was, really really late, and I if I remember what day it was, because it was the day the Guardian picked on this Murdoch phone call which I can't remember. But that day, March 11 2003, was one of the busiest days ever because there was lots of other stuff going on including this really long phone call to George Bush at the end of the day.

It was days like that when I tended to go back and I sort of did it there and then, so I'd say 80 per cent of days, I did it on the day, sometimes I did it the next morning, and I wrote it in these A4 diaries. My handwriting's terrible, but I mainly wrote in shorthand, manic and small.
And if filled one that day, I'd just grab a piece of paper or – its funny going through them sometimes there's like Whitehouse menus with mad scribbles on the back. Most days, I'd write.

John Rentoul:
The other revelation, of course, in this volume is that Tony Blair decided he was going to sack Gordon Brown in January 2003, which was too late, because by then you are right in the Iraq War. Do you think it would have helped him to do it, or was he right to say that the reason he didn't do it was that it would have brought his time as Prime Minister to an end even earlier?

Alastair Campbell:
I think this is, I guess, of all the different, when you look at Tony's premiership, and regularly you get asked what is the Blair legacy going to be and its complicated, its big. He's going to be a big figure in history. And you'd have to look at things like Ireland and the Constitution and Iraq will be part of it and his relationship with Gordon will be a big part of it. There is no doubt about that. And I think that is one of those questions that people will wrestle with for a long long time. I mean, I've wrestled with it for a very long time and I still do.

I said in the Guardian at the weekend that I am very conflicted about all of that. There are some Blair team, the inner team, who thought that Peter and I were wrong to go back and help Gordon before the last election, but partly I think it's a tribal Labour thing. But its also, and Tony used this phrase, and we both used this phrase independently in different books, this: 'brilliant but impossible', this 'impossible but brilliant'.

And if he was just brilliant, that would be brilliant and if he was just impossible then it would be easy – elbow. But the fact that he was both did make it, I think, it was a calculation all the time. And Tony is, in the book, fairly near the end when Tony says Gordon and I are still head and shoulders above the rest. It sounds a bit boastful but we're head and shoulders above the rest and it's probably right that he should be the next leader. And that's even after all the stuff that's chronicled.

So I think that when he came back that day, I think he came back from a holiday wasn't it and said, I've thought about it and I'm not going to sack him. He obviously thought that was the right thing then but very quickly he got in to the mindset of thinking actually its not black and white and you can't quite predict what will happen if I do, and so he didn't.

John Rentoul:
Partly that was because no one else emerged as a credible alternative?

Alastair Campbell:
And that was mainly partly because Gordon had done such a good job of establishing himself as the heir apparent.
The day John Smith died I was absolutely clear in my head that Tony's going to be the next leader of the Labour party it was so clear. But as Tony was going I don't think it was that clear and I think that what people felt was Gordon for all that he had been, at times, a nightmare, he was brilliant and a lot of the best things we did worked, and that was down to him. I think the feeling was that once he was free of that desire and ambition to be Prime Minister and he became leader of the Labour Party and Prime Minister that actually some of the stuff that had weighed them down might vanish.

John Rentoul:
I can't find the exact quotes right now but there are several points quite early on in 2002, 2001 even, where you say you think it might be your duty to stop Gordon Brown ever becoming Prime Minister.

Alastair Campbell:
Yeah, there is a bit where I say that. And I think there's bits where other people say similar things. And I come back to this point, what I diary does is it records what we are saying and thinking at a moment in time. And sometimes you say things when you are absolutely exasperated. And then when you actually think and are confronted with a choice you weigh it up more carefully.

I think Gordon did do a very, very good job of establishing himself as the obvious successor. If you think back, if you Googled all the personalities who were part of the Blair Brown Government, at various points being talked about as possible future leaders, but none of them ever, I don't think, ever got close to where they might have been in a position to challenge Gordon.

John Rentoul:
I think I wrote about them one after another, David Blunkett Alan Milburn, Alan Johnson.

Alastair Campbell:
Jack Straw at one point.

John Rentoul:
No, I never wrote about him.

Alastair Campbell:
Charles Clarke

John Rentoul:
Charles Clarke, certainly.

Alastair Campbell:
There were lots of people. People talked about at different points. And the other thing, whenever that happened Gordon did and said things that got himself reestablished, very, very quickly.

John Rentoul:
Right, that's enough about Gordon. You are very good at the media and managing the press. How come you've got a reputation for spin, if you're so good at spin?

Alastair Campbell:
It is ridiculously ironic that I was in charge of Tony Blair's media relations and my media relations and my press became a complete car crash.

I think partly it's because we underestimated the extent to which this spin thing was going to extend into a real thing for the public.

I still don't think you should over estimate it. There might be a few people out there who switch sides because of me, but I think they'll be very few and far between. I think all the big stuff was about public services, foreign policy and so forth. I refer you to the statements I made for the Leveson Inquiry. I gave two very long statements. And I think this was a product of the media age. What the press, those who go on about spin and me, is what they want me to say its six of one and half a dozen of the other. I don't buy that I am afraid.

I think the spin thing was a way of the media talking about themselves all the time, which they love doing.

It was a way of undermining Tony Blair by saying this guy's not strong enough and actually he has to have these evil, manipulative people around him doing the real kind of dirty stuff that he doesn't know about.

I think the Tories also didn't have enough intellectual challenge to us, so a succession of Tory leaders, including the current one have preferred to persuade themselves that that we weren't beaten by a better politician with better policies and better values, we were beaten by spin. And it was in their interests as well to be constantly talking it.
Now did we run very tough and professional and modernized communications, yes we did.
Why did we do that? Well the Labour Party lost election after election after election because of an ingrained, in built media bias that damaged them and damaged us. We lost elections so we had to change that. I said to Leveson that I think after '97 and again I absolve myself of a bit of this but again not all of it. I think a lot of it was about Gordon's people. I think we stuck too long with the techniques of Opposition. The thing about reannouncement but it was actually. There is nothing wrong with reannouncing as long as you say 'we have announced this before but we want to do it again because we think the public need to know about this. That whole thing about double counting and triple counting. It is pointless and counterproductive. That is the only bit that I am willing to say, as it were, our fault.

You've been in those briefings, when, you know what its like when there is a full on frenzy going on. If you allow the press to push you aside that is what they'll do, so you have to be able to deal with that. They will call it spin. Now I can give you an example of that.
I can remember in the build up to the Hutton enquiry when I was at home with the press outside the house the whole time. A guy from the BBC was outside. He phoned me up and I answered the phone because I was accessible. I did my job. I was watching the telly with the kids so he asked me a couple of things and I said next to nothing, you know away you go. I watched the news later that night and he was doing a two-way from outside the house. Where he said 'the spin from behind me tonight'. Now who asked for it? Now he went on to faithfully report what I had said but the definition of it was that it was spin because I had said it. Now what I had done was answer a couple of questions. Everything we said came to be defined through the spin prism.

Another example, Tony the first prime minister ever to do these select committees, the monthly press conference which he cursed me for, every month thereafter. Which I notice David Cameron is quietly forgetting about. And is there a fuss among the media – not really. Would there have been a fuss among the media if we had done the same – there would. And I can remember the thing about the press conference and back to spin. Nick Robinson made a very interesting observation. He said, to be fair to me we did all these things to try to improve the debate including the press conferences but the problem was that Tony Blair was so good at them that they became boring. Now what that means is they are only interesting if he says something daft, contradicts what he said before and that is the definition of news. He is the prime minister. He is a very important political figure and actually what he has to say is quite important. Where's the spin?

John Rentoul:
Do you think spin doctors have a shorter political life now?

Alastair Campbell:
It depends what they do and how they do it. You've seen this guy for Jeremy Hunt, he's gone, right. He's had a very short shelf life because he obviously did something that over-

stepped the mark. I think there are people that could last a very long time. I think the leaders, I think leaders get renewal and can get renewal from new people.

Ah there's Tessa Jowell, Dame Tessa looking resplendent. Talk about making a bloody entrance. Somebody stand up for Tessa, she's a dame for God's sake.

Tessa Jowell:
I was just seen someone on Mile End Road who said 'you look much better in real life than you look on the telly.'

Audience laughs.

Alastair Campbell:
I think you can get renewal through people, so for example, we had a dinner at Chequers just before Tony stopped being Prime Minister and what was amazing about -there was a lot of people here would know and would have heard about. Sally and I were there, Peter Mandelson was there, Pat McFadden was there, but there were also big parts of the team who people had never heard of, you know, secretaries and drivers and things like that. Tony said in his own book there came a point where both Angie Hunter and I were pressing to leave and Tony sort of stopped us and, he said in his book if there's one thing he's learnt its if people do feel its time to move on you've got to kind of let them do that. He by then I feel felt, because I do feel there is something about these real top jobs in public life, it a cliché but they are incredibly lonely. You don't have many people that you can trust. Tony had only a small group around him who he could completely trust. Trust in the obvious sense but also trust to say what we think. I thought one of his huge strengths as a leader was that he was surrounded by people who weren't at all deferential, we would always say what we thought and he would then kind of weigh that up. And also we were different. Sally's take on things, Sally and I were quite close on a lot of things, but Sally, Jonathan, Angie and Charlie Faulkner, Peter Hyman, Andrew Adonis, very different sort of people. And Tony would kind of hoover our thinking and contacts and then he decided things. So I don't think you could survive in that kind of place that I was for much longer than I did. I think particularly now with the modern media as it is. It's a hard place to be and I think I. To be honest, you know I wanted to leave a long time before I left. Part of me wishes I had and part of me is glad I could see it through to as long as I did and I went back for the 2005 campaign.

John Rentoul:
Which will be the next volume of the diaries, which we are looking forward to.

Alastair Campbell:
I hope so.

John Rentoul:
Now I'm sure there are lots of questions bursting to be asked.

Geography student at Queen Mary. I have two questions.
Firstly, which one of your legs is longer?

Alastair Campbell:
I can honestly say I have never been asked that question before. I have to go around with these things in my shoes. One of them is slightly more built up. My right leg is slightly

shorter than my left leg. I do actually love being asked questions I have never been asked before. Tell you what, if you come to the book signing afterwards, and I will buy you a book.

Audience roars.

Do you think it's a good thing to streamline the civil service?

Alastair Campbell:
The thing about the civil service, Alun has interviewed me about this for his Masters.

Alun Evans (Cabinet Office):
PhD

Audience roars.

Alastair Campbell:
Alun's interviewed me for his coursework. My general take on the civil service, because I know a lot of you have studied it is that I felt there were quite a few people at the top end who were absolutely brilliant. I think Jeremy Hayward, the various jobs I knew him in, both the Treasury and Number 10 – superb. John Holmes who was Tony's foreign policy advisor when Tony first became Prime Minister – absolutely extraordinary. How that guy did foreign policy and Northern Ireland at the time of the Good Friday agreement and eventually Tony broke that down into different bits. So I could name lots of people at the top level who were absolutely brilliant. I can also say one of the reasons we got elected with the majority we did was because we exploited the weaknesses that we saw in John Major, as the government, his communications. And we were able to run them ragged, in part because they hadn't understood the way the world was changing, the way politics was changing because of the media.

And so when we went in in 1997 I knew we were going to have to make changes but I also knew that I would have to do it in a cooperative way. Even now routinely The Daily Mail and the Telegraph write that I cobbled the information, which is absolute nonsense, I didn't have the power to do that.

Some left and we did have to find new people. One of the first things I did, and one of the best things I did was that I needed a new deputy as the deputy was moving on and I picked a guy, Godric Smith, I think he was number five or six or seven in the press office, but I just decided he was the guy I wanted to be my number two and I never regretted that. In that sort of position, you really need good people in that kind of position.
That was a revolutionary idea that you go down the ranks and pull them up.
What I think this government is doing at the moment – lets understand that a lot of it is about cost cutting and I think there are all over the place in the public sector trying to find what they can present as principled arguments and policy-based arguments for what are actually spending decisions.

I think that Tony sometimes got very frustrated with some departments in particular. He had a bit of a nightmare with the Home Office, if I'm being absolutely frank.

I think the politicians were seen as inconvenient coming along and troubling the expertise that was there. In the end the Civil Service is there, vast lot doing a good job. I do worry that this thing at the moment is cost-driven and you do keep hearing this exodus from the Treasury which is worrying as the Treasure obviously attracts a lot of the brightest and the best and so it should. To keep hearing that some of the brightest and the best don't want

to hang around is quite dangerous. I don't think the Rolls Royce thing has served anyone particularly well. If you think about the Rolls Royce and the Sir Humphrey the two sort of polls of this debate and you have to get somewhere in between where you are able to modernize, you are able to change but don't do it in a way that risks throwing out the best. That's what I worry about.
Alastair Campbell:
You've now buggered up my orthotics haven't gone back in properly.

Audience question:
I just wonder whether washing our dirty laundry in public actually serves that cause, particularly at the present time, with the Iraq Inquiry about to make its deliberations public. Things like, for example Tony Blair putting olive oil on his toast for breakfast. How can that possibly help him?

Alastair Campbell:
By dint of the fact that in that particularly entry I reveal that thank god he was putting marmalade on his toast as opposed to olive oil. No, I wouldn't take that too seriously, I wouldn't imagine that John Chilcott is going to be too worried about marmalade and olive oil on Tony Blair's toast.

I have been very conscious the whole way through this process with the diaries. They are there. I have kept them. I decided to publish them and I have always been conscious of wanting to do it in a way that helps Tony's reputation and helps the Labour Party.

So, for example, I got criticized in some quarters when I did the Blair Years that I was open about the fact that I have edited them very, very carefully so they don't damage Gordon Brown. Because he was about to lead the Labour Party into the next election. I was very open about that.

I don't think that these diaries that are published tomorrow – I assume the Guardian have used the bits that they think are most newsworthy. Because its topical, the bit about Murdoch, the rest about Gordon, didn't add that much to what people know. I think what the diaries as a whole do is that they show what an incredibly difficult job government is and they show what an unbelievably complicated job being Prime Minister is.

And I think that a fair reader, reads them and at the end of it thinks pretty highly of Tony Blair. I did an event at Kings Place on Monday night where I got questions about where Tony's reputation is. I think part of the issues is that Tony has stopped being a politician, that Tony is a great communicator and he is now doing, in a sense, politics/public service/ other things in a different way.

So, for example, I was with these people the other night, who were saying 'I think its terrible that Tony Blair just goes off and he now makes millions and blah, blah, blah, blah. And I said to them, have you ever read how many people he employs? Have you ever read how many charity projects he runs in Africa? Have you ever been reminded of the fact that he wrote a book for which he got £4m for it and he gave it away? They are the kinds of things that just get pushed to one side.

Now if you're an active politician, as it were, going for election again, you kind of worry a bit more about those things because you know that your reputation is kind of getting hit and it might affect how people might vote for you. I go back to my point I made earlier about legacy and the things that Tony will be remembered for and I think Tony's reputation

in history will be very positive, I really do.
Audience question:
Do you think 24/7 media was the main driver for the British Government to move away from a traditional style of Cabinet government?

I don't think we did move away from a traditional style of Cabinet government. See, if you want to talk about spin, I think this is one of the spun myths. Even Clare Short I can remember once saying, this is the most united government that she can recall in her lifetime.

And that is true on the big, fundamental questions there were divisions of personality at times, there were some really bid divisions on policy at times, but generally when you read Tony Benn's diaries of his time in the Cabinet and you have Cabinet meetings that went on for days and you had people going at and talking about how the vote went in the Cabinet and that is fine if that is the sort of Government people want. But its not terribly efficient, its not terribly effective.

And the Cabinet that Tony led, it kind of led, it was broadly united added to which in political management terms, I remember Tony regularly used to say if the first I knew a Cabinet minister disagreed with the general thrust of something he raised it at the Cabinet table, that is a failure of political management, of political leadership. So I don't believe we did move away. Tony Blair was the sort of guy who didn't care what kind of chair he sat in.

Ultimately what Government is about is the decisions that you are making. And how you are making them, its whether you are weighing those decisions up properly.

Audience questions:
Why is it you who came to the fore in the media and the public eye. Why is it you who is writing the diaries that gain a huge amount of interest.

I think because, I'll go back to my point about, I mean I was seeing the media twice a day. And I did do the job in a certain way, that is true. I remember a journalist once saying, your problem and Peter Mandelson's is that you are too interesting. And we actually like writing about you. We think you're really interesting. Now the only way for me to have avoided that was to for me to have said.

Tessa stop doing your emails! You have to listen. Unless you are texting Sebastian Coe, or Boris Johnson I am not tolerating this behaviour.

No, I'll go back to my point about them loving themselves. So when they talk about me they are talking about themselves.
The media in an ideal world, the media is a vehicle for communication, they way the media was changing, most media was becoming a barrier to communication, because all you were getting in news and comment was this sense that. Tony said at the Leveson Inquiry, when he was preparing for Leveson he asked his office to look at randomly a hundred stories in the Daily Mail. Every single one, not 90 per cent, 80 per cent, 70 per cent. Every single one was negative. Now is Tony Blair a hundred per cent a negative sort of phenomenon? Course he's not. So the point about trivialization is this, is that if the public end up thinking 'oh that bloody government, all they do is fight with each other' 'its all about Cherie Blair buying flats' and its all about Alastair Campbell. If they think that's all being in Government is about, and they think it's just another soap opera then you've got real problems.

And you go back to the first question about trust. I think the whole thing about trust. Most politicians be they Tory, Labour, Lib Dem or Green, Nationalist, most politicians I think are driven because they have strong beliefs, they know that politics matters and they want to make a difference. And yet what is put over to the public, the whole time is they are venal they are in it for themselves. We probably have the least corrupt politics in the world. And yet, because of MPs expenses, I'm not saying it wasn't bad, it was bad, but because of that how often do you hear, 'they're all the same, they don't make a different there's no point voting, no difference between them. Its absolute bollocks and it's driven out there the whole time by this culture of negativity.

Audience question:
You asked for a hostile question and this is the best I can do.
Your point, Alastair, about trivialization. In your last volume, deals with a summit, a Euro summit on page 450 or something like that. Euro summit Lisbon 2000. and you got really antsy and upset about a story that had said three members of the Government were flying to the summit, Robin Cook, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, arrived in three separate aircraft. And you said 'The Standard splashed on it, which got them all thinking they had to do it. It was a big problem that we had a political press that wasn't really interested in the politics and was obsessed with the trivia.' And you go on, lots of other grumpy sentences. Two pages later you are reporting another summit. The OAU in Cairo. This one is being discussed not by the media but by the Cabinet. These are big issues we've got, AIDs, Famine, good governance all that stuff, and here's what you say, if I can decipher it. Robin gave a very funny account of Mugabe at the Europe Africa summit in Cairo. He said Gaddafi spoke for 45 minutes. Did he mention the Third Way, asked TB. Apparently Gaddafi is very big on the Third Way. No, said Robin, but he did wear painted fingernails. And then you move on to the serious stuff. Mugabe went back to his usual potty ways, said Robin, and announced that Peter Hain was having a gay affair with Peter Tatchell. How did they feel, said TB. Robin said, Hain was calm, Tatchell was furious. Now, you know, trivia?

Alastair Campbell:
That's within the context of a Cabinet discussion. We're a bunch of human beings having a little bit of light relief. I didn't come out and brief you that there had been a discussion about Hain and Tatchell.

The trivia, in a funny way, matters because it tells us in some way about the people with whom we are dealing.

The point about the plane story, now I thought that was a perfectly legitimate Evening Standard splash because you're there, the thing is playing out live on the telly and there was something unusual about it. Three ministers from the same team arriving in three separate planes. Logistically Robin was coming from Scotland, Gordon from Stockholm or wherever it was. The thing is once we have that story and have got through it and I can remember this vividly. I went down through the press centre, got absolutely mobbed as you did at those briefings as you know you've got these Dutch and German and French and Italian and Spanish journalists trying to talk to you about what's going on on the agenda and all I'm getting from you guys including Robin Oakley, Robin was BBC at the time said to me: I'm really sorry but you know what it's like.

Once all the papers are going on it they feel that they sort of have to. And that's what I mean about the kind of frustration that I felt at times like that. I'm not saying its not a legitimate story but how many millions of words, I mention the Cherie flats thing, how many millions of words written about that. How many hours did I have to spend working

on that? And in the end why did it become such a big thing? Because our press office inadvertently said something that turned out to be wrong. Now you'd have bloody thought the Pope had died.

Audience question:
Do you think Tony Blair still has a role to play in British politics? If so, in what capacity? And also do you think you could get him reelected?

Alastair Campbell:
Yes, I'm sure if he wanted to be police commissioner for Hull.

Audience laughs. He'd have a bit of a fight on his hands.

I hope he does reengage much more in debate about Britain. Every time I see him, I say for all that the bloody press go on about you the whole time, for all that you get those polite double-barrelled people walking through Lord Justice Leveson's Chambers and calling you a war criminal, for all of that, actually.

I get a lot of TB stuff as I go around the whole time. Inevitably you get some people who say 'he was a disappointment, this that and the other'. I still get loads of people who say 'gosh, I wish Tony Blair was still around. And what I say to him is every time you pop up on the telly or the radio, as he did this weekend, and when he gives an argument or when he appeared at Leveson it just sort of reminds people that he is very clever, and he understands the world and I think he should do more of it.

I am organizing this Labour Party fund raiser on July 11, if there are any rich people in here come and see me afterwards. Tony is going to be the patron of that, and come to it and speak so I think he will do stuff like that. I think that once you've been Prime Minister. I don't think we should be like France where, you know I can remember studying in France 30 years ago and the same sort of names coming around and around. I don't think we should have that.

But I have no doubt at all that if he wanted to he could do all sorts of things and he really did want that European job. God knows why, but he did. I can't think of anything worse, but anyway.

Audience question:
I opposed the war in Iraq. I did so on the basis that if Saddam Hussain had weapons of mass destruction the most likely time for him to use them would be when he was attacked. And if he didn't have weapons of mass destruction then we shouldn't be attacking him. So did you take into account the danger of him using those weapons of mass destruction, the impact that they would have had had he have used them, and what was it that convinced you it was worth the risk?

Alastair Campbell:
That was a very fair question. I think there is a passage in the book, which even now every time I look at it, it slightly brings hairs up on the back of my neck. I think Sally was there as well when we went to a briefing at the MOD. Where they briefed us on the level of preparedness of British troops in the event of chemical and biological weapon attack.

This is why, whenever people say, 'he did it for Bush' he did it for this, he did it for that, I always say to them, at least understand that he thought about every single possible ramification. And there was very detailed and very specific planning about what would have happened. And indeed when the parliamentary vote happened. Its really funny going

through the Cabinet Office process of what we can and can't say. They still have this thing about you can't say about the existence of special forces. Even though you have hundreds of books out there about them.

The point is, I think a lot of the initial action was in relation to that as well so the fear, it was real. It was absolutely real. I think Tony said this when he went to the Chilcott Inquiry. That all of the things that we thought were going to happen and that we worried about didn't happen and the things that did happen including al-Qaedapiling in and the Iranians piling in and all the rest of it.

And we thought there was the makings of a civil service structure and it turned out there was a shell. So all the things that we thought were going to happen, didn't. Saddam fell much more quickly I think than had been envisaged. The attacks against the forces that we worried about didn't materialize. And so yes that was all thought about.

Going back to the nub of your question. He either had them, in which case, don't provoke him or he didn't in which case don't attack him. Tony's view, absolutely, was that we all thought he had them. Back to the MOD, there wasn't a person in that room, who didn't believe what was being said. So he's the Prime Minister, he's not having to give an opinion, he's not having to say yes or no in an opinion poll, he's got to take a decision and I can remember him saying at various points. And Sally and I would have these discussions with him at various points, and I can remember one where Sally was there when I said: 'look Tony, you do realize there is every chance this is going to be the end of you, don't you. Is it really, really worth it? And he said: 'its always worth doing what you think is the right thing and we have ignored Saddam for far too long and that includes Britain. And that framed his management response to this the whole way through.

It was not difficult choice or no choice, it was difficult choice or difficult choice. And I have recorded this as well where he says: 'I don't want to be the person who wakes up one day as the Prime Minister of Britain, who talked about this threat, who knew about this threat, who was absolutely convinced this threat was real and then one day it happened on his watch, or 10 years after his watch but they guy who could have dealt with it.

Would we find that there were really important bits you have left out in editing for reasons that would not be helpful to the Labour Party? No, you'd find things that I have left out for personal reasons. You'd find things that I have left out because the guy who was editing them would say you can't say this every day about Clare Short, because it becomes a bit boring and repetitive. There is certainly no big thing left out. And to be fair to the Cabinet Office on the whole process, which started when we were still in power and now with a new Government they have actually been really, really good. There are some things that I have left out. There are some things where I have had to compromise a little bit. Special Forces.

And also the Palace was amazingly good about the old Diana thing and there were bits there that they were sensitive about and quite often what the Cabinet Office would do is say, look we have circulated this to so and so and they would quite like it if you didn't. But very few where they dug in heels and actually said that you can't do. There were some and because I'd been at the other side of the process in the past I was always happy with that. If they gave you a reason. Where I did dig my heels in a bit, for example, that whole thing about Civil Servants can't answer back. Not in my experience. But generally the Cabinet Office were really good.

And don't forget some of the key bits in relations to Iraq I had to give to the Hutton Inquiry anyway. Describing the process of that. That was one of the lowest points of my life. Was having to sit down with a complete stranger and read him my diary. Everything. So that he could decide what had to be submitted to Hutton. I did read the really personal bits in there and I did at one point break down in tears saying 'I just can't do this, I don't see why am I having to do this?'. And he said: look I know this is really, really hard but the Prime Minister has set up an inquiry, you are a key advisor to the Prime Minister, you've got to cooperate in every which way. Now, I'm glad I took the advice. Because with Lord Hutton I think my diaries actually helped rather than hindered.

Audience question:
Do you think Gordon Brown should have had the election in 2007?

Put it this way, the mistake was to have the public debate about it. He should have either done it or not done it. I think up until that point his premiership had been going pretty well. What it did, it unsettled people. Now we have the fixed term and all the rest of it, but election timing is such a powerful thing and once you have let it go out there. So that was a mistake. If he was going to have it, he might well have won. I think at the time I said don't do it, but I can't quite remember.

Audience question:
Was TB too much of a foreign policy Prime Minister?
Alastair Campbell:

No, I don't think so. I think like a lot of Prime Ministers he found it really interesting and he got more engaged in it than he thought that he would, but I think especially what with the European Union and post-9/11, it's just such a massive part of any Prime Minister's job. And I think what Tony did very well was to build this argument that foreign and domestic policy – the clear divide is no longer applicable. That actually foreign policy is a fundamental part of domestic policy now. And I think that's a really important argument that all of us need to understand.

Audience question:
How does Ed Milliband retain the momentum of the Labour Party?

Alastair Campbell:
I didn't vote for Ed, I voted for David. But I like Ed personally and I do see him from time to time and we have a natter about stuff, and I think that he had a really tough start. I think part of that was because most of the media were backing David. And they decided lets kick Ed around a bit. One quality that's really important is resilience and I think he has stood up to it pretty well. I think he is getting much, much better in the House of Commons. I think Cameron is starting to come over as really petulant and arrogant and not really thinking things through. I think Ed is standing there and putting him under pressure. I think Ed and Ed are beginning to turn public opinion. In relation to the economy, helped every time George Osborne appears on television. And I think now what it's all about is policy agenda for the future.

Up until now I think what we have done is, its difficult because these guys, the Eds have only really ever known a winning environment because they started out mid-90s. And when they started working with Gordon and we started working with Tony people pretty

much knew we were going to win. It was going to be very hard to balls that up. So they've only ever known a winning environment. A losing environment is so, so much harder. I think they have reestablished the sense that we know how to do opposition. They have opposed pretty well, now its about policy agenda for the future. And that is where we have really got to come into our own. Because that is where the momentum will come from. Because I don't think this lot are very good at policy.

Frazer Nelson wrote a very interesting piece recently in either the Telegraph or the Spectator, can't remember where. Where Cameron presenting himself as heir to Blair and he said, yes both were completely focused on winning and persuading the media to their side but actually what New Labour did was that they did the strategy first and then they did the persuasion. Cameron just does the persuasion. And whatever he is persuading about at that time he is very, very good. So who ever he sees: 'this is my number one priority'. 'This is really top of my agenda now' 'This is what I am really going to focus on'.

So 'the Big Society', or 'we're going to be the Greenest Government ever' so whatever these big strategic moves are he doesn't actually stick with them. And so we have now got to move into that space on policy.

Audience question:
What in your view is the proper way for the media to hold politicians to account?

Alastair Campbell:
A lot will depend on Leveson. The most interesting thing if you go on the Leveson website is to read his questions through all the witnesses, because you can see where he is heading in terms of his thinking. I thought that what Gove did at the parliamentary press gathering was one of the most stupid ministerial interventions there has ever been. I think it's like Geoff Hoon had made a speech about the Hutton Inquiry during the Hutton inquiry. It's so crass. And my worry is, he wasn't doing it as a freelance, he was doing Cameron's leg work.

And actually what they want to get Leveson to do is to produce what ever he produces and get the Labour Party on the side of press curbs which is how the press will present it and restricting freedom which is what they'll say and get the Tory party on the side of getting the press back on board. And if that is the game it means we have learnt absolutely nothing about what's happened.

Audience question:
What will be Gordon Brown's legacy?

Alastair Campbell:
It is complicated. Obviously Tony won three elections, and in politics that is a really big thing. Gordon fought one election and he lost it. And that obviously is a bad thing when it happens to a politician. But I still think Gordon will be seen as a really big figure in British history.

And for good things as well as bad. We are back to the brilliant but impossible thing. Because what saddened me, I wrote about this on my blog the other day, I do believe that if all the top people who started out together in 1994. Was that if we'd actually all stayed together, united, through the whole period I think we'd still be there. Because I don't think there is any intellectual challenge that to the basic New Labour position at all. From the Lib Dems or the Tories. I really believe that.

So actually it was the falling out a lot of the time. Now everyone has got to take some part of responsibility for that. Of the TB/GB thing, I think will be a bigger part of the legacy than the Tony legacy because there is so much more that Tony can point to.
But you look back at the economic management.

Ten years of pretty steady growth. It all ended badly in one way, but also understand this if you were to talk to any of the other world leaders who were around at the time of the crisis to name one leader who they really felt rose to it I think most of them would say Gordon Brown. So that will be part of his legacy to stop the world going right over.

I think the Euro debate. Tony was really, really keen to get Britain in Europe. Now he may have thought that it was for personal ambition reasons that Gordon was up to but actually I think if we actually took a poll of most British people now, who was right and who was wrong, I don't have any doubt who would win that one. So it's complicated. Then you've got the whole Scottish thing, and devolution thing, and the tax credits and the spending on schools and hospitals. I mean Gordon was a big part of that.

Audience question:
Hans Blix, right or wrong?

Alastair Campbell:
That expression where you feel the pit of your stomach drop. One of them was when someone from the intelligence services came to me and said, again this is in the book, how bad would it be for the Prime Minister and you guys if we discovered there were no weapons of mass destruction. And I said, bad. Well it looks like the best we might be able to say is that we know he had them but some how he's got rid of them. So that for me was that moment. And I think Blix's is a very interesting thing because I describe many points when Tony gets frustrated with Blix because he thinks there came a point where Blix was doing a brilliant job in many, many ways but started to become quite political. He saw his job not to be chief weapons inspector but to stop the war. Maybe for understandable reasons but I think that's where a slight breakdown developed, which was a real problem.

Audience question:
Would TB's success have been different if he was allowed to 'do God'?

Alastair Campbell:
God? That's a big subject that. This again, you talk about spin. I now get literally every day at least one, usually more, emails, tweets, messages on Facebook, letters from students and academics asking me about this 'we don't do Got thing'. And it's in the papers somewhere every day. And it's always the same advert: 'Alastair Campbell who 'famously' said, we don't do God.' Never just 'says', always 'famously said'.

In the run up to the Iraq War after 9/11 there was a guy from Vanity Fair, David Margoline who was following Tony around the world. He was doing this huge profile and he was desperate for some 'face time' with Tony. And I kept fobbing him off, saying you'll get there so he came on all these trips to Pakistan, to India, to Africa, to America a couple of times and eventually I said 'come on your number's come up, down the front of the plane, you've got half an hour with Tony Blair, sit down and have a drink, blah blah'.

Very nice guy, really good journalist, asks really serious, sensible questions and then he asks, 'finally, Prime Minister', and asks him another question, and then he says 'one final

question on that Prime Minister' and asked another question, and then says 'this time, really my final, final questions, Prime Minister' and then he asks another question. And whereas Tony's too polite I'm starting to get a bit agitated. He then goes 'finally, finally, finally Prime Minister, can I ask you about your faith?' And I said, 'David, we don't do God'. That is how it started. He put I, in his piece, on like page 25. The Daily Telegraph picked it up and ran it on like page seven. And it then just sort of went 'whoosh'. And now I get asked about it all the time.

Would it have made a different? I think it would have made a difference for the worse. I really believe that. We are not like America. British people, I think, don't like their. I think if they believe, that's great, but I think if there is the slightest hint that they are allying their religious faith to their politics then I think people of all faiths and all parties feel a bit icky about it in Britain. In America you can't not go to the church every Sunday and come out holding the bible if you're running for Office, it's just the way that it is.

Tony, John knows this, is more religious than people think.

John Rentoul:
More than I thought and I wrote a book about him!

Alastair Campbell:
That's twice you've mentioned your book – we're here to sell my book.

No, he is, it's a big, big thing. And because he's so modern looking and he laughs about himself, people underestimate the God thing. But I think if that had become a part of the political message, it would have been a big problem.

I remember John Harting [sic] who was Rupert Murdoch's right-hand man in Australia, I quoted this in my submission to Leveson, once said to me the British newspapers are the best in the world and, he said, they're the worst in the world. And sometimes its in the same edition. There is something in that. We don't want to lose that best in the world thing because they are both in terms of some of the great investigations of history, but how many people have gone to Leveson and talked about the thalidomide inquiry. It just underlines how few there have been since that period and one of the worries I have about the way journalism is going.

This isn't their fault as it were, but because of the pressures of TV, the internet and the rest of it, real investigative journalism is kind of dying because these guys are having to blog and tweet and fill another page. I met a reporter at the theatre the other day, she asked me, she works at one of the tabloids as a gossip columnist as a freelancer. She is getting paid exactly the same shift rate as I was getting paid on the same paper thirty years ago. The economics of newspapers is really, really tough. So out of this [Leveson Inquiry] has got to come the understanding that just as the BBC gets huge support proper, investigative journalism and proper, serious journalism ought to be getting support of some sort.

People think I am slightly potty about Paul Dacre but I do think he is the most malign influence in the British media bar none because that sort of journalism is destroying, partly because it is so successful, is destroying the sort of journalism I think we should be keeping.

Separating news and comment may be idealistic, but at least giving the reader the understanding that is a fact. There is Bill Keegan back there. If you read Bill Keegan's column, you know that you are getting Bill Keegan's opinion.

But you know when he is putting a fact in it that he has hopefully checked out that that is a fact. When he says x percent of GDP is this and Y per cent of the Mexican economy does this you kind of hope that and trust that he's got that. A lot of the things you see in newspapers as facts are not facts at all. And I think we've got to get back to that. Somehow separating out what is fact and what is comment, it maybe that I am too idealistic about that, I don't know.

Audience question:
Alastair Campbell:
Do you think enough is being done to reform the leadership and structure of the unions? That whole thing that is going on at the minute with unions and progress, is depressing. The Labour Party won three general elections in a row, partly because the Tories were tired and out of time, but also because we were very open and inclusive and we built a coalition that included people who had been Labour all their life and people who had never thought of voting Labour before.

And if you start sending messages to people who'd never been Labour before that there is something a bit wrong with them or if you start saying that people who are looking outwards to other parties to try to learn from what they do and there is nothing wrong with sitting down with people from other parties and saying what do you think about transport and having a bit of cross-pollination, I think that's quite depressing. I think some of the unions have actually modernized and changed and developed in an interesting way and I think that both last leaders of the TUC both Brendan Barber and John Monks can point to a real legacy of change and modernization in their approach as well. But when I see that return to a sort of sense of almost like tribalism, I think that is really, really dangerous and they should be really careful about pushing that too hard.