

Born Yesterday

the vigorous younger one) – that first sighting of the powerful world leader now looking vulnerable and frail brought back something Mrs Thatcher's former foreign-affairs private secretary Charles Powell had said after her eviction from Downing Street, in November 1990, seventeen years ago now.

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With Denis, and in visible distress, tears smudging her make-up, she had been driven straight from Number 10 to the house in the unpromising-looking gated development in Dalwich which was meant to be their new home. It was from there that Mrs Thatcher called Powell after she had been out of office for a few days: she had a plumbing problem and didn't know what to do. 'Try the *Willow Pigeon*', is what Powell is said to have told her.

The News as a Novel

Tony Blair's boast was that he never touched a computer during his years as prime minister. He didn't own a mobile phone. He didn't need one; he was surrounded by aides with phones and pagers – battalions of people with personalised ringtones dialling about, staring into BlackBerrys and do-everything mobile devices. 'Who r u?', the reply he received to the first text he sent on the mobile he was equipped with when he stepped down as prime minister, he said was typical of his uselessness with any kind of new technology.

That was less than a week ago. Today – 3 July 2007 – Blair has been out of office for just six days. On 24 June, at a set-piece rally in Manchester, he had finally passed the Labour leadership on to Gordon Brown. On 27 June, Brown had at last settled his craving to become prime minister. Blair had arrived at Buckingham Palace in the official armoured-plated car shortly after one to tender his resignation to the queen; he left the palace in a plain Vauxhall. A few

station with its prefabricated walls and oily rags for their arrival in the New World. The irony of this for Tony Blair, the man who had invented such things in the issue of national security, the introduction of identity cards, of biometric screening and so on, was also made much of by commentators.)

But the car sent to pick him up at Darlington station was late. The early news had shown him logging his own bag out of the first-class lounge at King's Cross and onto the train. The bag was open, bulging, a brown woollen sleeve trailing, the buckle of a strap bouncing along in the dirt.

Gordon Burn

The scene at Darlington, played out under the vaulted glass roof with its cast-iron pillars and braces, on the greasy cobbled ramp that led up to the turning-circle and the taxi rank, was a melancholy one. For

Blair, the master communicator, it was a symbolic sackcloth-and-ashes moment, larded with bathos, choreographed for the cameras: that is what you wanted and now you've got it. But

Cherie's face was fierce. She did the thing of twisting her watch-strap on her wrist, scowling at it and twisting it back-temperedly again. (She had never looked like a willing visitor to the north-east and his constituency in his twenty-four years as an MP, and this would be one of the last visits ever; she was out of there.) She shifted from foot to foot. A pool of liquid



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