Bagehot – Urbane guerrilla

Michael Gove is the most interesting of a bland generation of politicians

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THE many books and films about the New Labour government, surely Britain's most documented post-war administration, never need sexing up. Drama is ensured when the cast includes Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson: respectively a political natural with a zeal to "reorder this world", his Nixonian neighbour, contorted by ambition and early traumas, and an Iago of a third man. Even the supporting cameos—Alastair Campbell, the young Ed Balls—were compelling.

Despite some radical policies, the coalition is a duller bunch. David Cameron is as blandly well-rounded as his face. Nick Clegg is another man of privilege, decency—and plainness. Faced with the bloodlessly technocratic likes of Andrew Lansley, Theresa May and Chris Huhne (the health, home and energy secretaries), the Labour opposition might be forgiven for invoking Disraeli's judgment on Gladstone's front bench: "a range of exhausted volcanoes...not a flame flickers on a single pallid crest". That is, were the current Labour lot not so run-of-the-mill themselves.

True, George Osborne, the chancellor of the exchequer, is guile incarnate, a Tory Talleyrand to whom Mr Cameron subcontracts his strategic thinking. Boris Johnson, the Hogarthian mayor of London, is a star. But neither has deep or interesting convictions. Steve Hilton has plenty, and an incendiary personality, but Mr Cameron's closest adviser is unknown outside Westminster. Only one member of Britain's presiding generation of politicians casts any real spell: Michael Gove. And his work as education secretary—stimulating more choice and competition among state schools through independently run "academies" and "free schools"—has only a little to do with it.

Mr Gove paints on a vast canvas. Some cabinet members lack strong views even on their own portfolios. Mr Gove has them on education but also on foreign policy, where he is an out-and-proud

neoconservative and the Tories' biggest supporter of Israel; and on home affairs, where he is diamond-hard on crime and terrorism—though liberal on immigration. Hawkishness was his motif as a newspaper columnist: he is the most successful scribbler-turned-politician since Nigel Lawson, a former chancellor.

He is also closer to the prime minister than any cabinet member bar Mr Osborne, so has influence to match his enthusiasms. In cabinet meetings earlier this year, he was ardent in pushing for British intervention in Libya—evangelically so, grumbled some of those around the oval table. Mr Cameron entered power with a quietist foreign policy, a vaguely liberal take on criminal justice and an uncertain line on how to fight Islamic radicalisation at home. In all three areas, policy has edged in a Govite direction. Circumstances and public opinion played their part, but so did Mr Gove himself, whom colleagues find "amazing" and "intimidatingly clever" when making a case.

Because Europe has exercised the party for so long, the Tories' divisions over wider foreign policy are overlooked. Most believe in giving a higher priority to interests than values. They are, in the argot of right-wing theology, paleocon rather than neocon. But Mr Gove's view is not friendless; Mr Osborne, among others, tends to take his side. As the Libyan intervention threatens to turn sour, there could be recriminations between the two camps. Israel is another divisive subject. Some in the party are perturbed by what they see as an unduly pro-Palestinian foreign policy: last year, in Turkey, Mr Cameron compared Gaza to "a prison camp". If, as planned, the United Nations General Assembly votes in September on whether to recognise Palestine as a state, the cabinet could be split over how Britain should vote. Mr Gove's gifts as an advocate might again prove useful.

Class helps to account for Mr Gove's intellectual ardour. There was always a subtle divide in the band of "modernisers" who sought to make the Conservatives electable again. The posh ones, namely Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne, are in one sense the most old-fashioned kind of Tories: men interested above all in power, and aware that ideology can be an encumbrance in its pursuit. Modernisers from humbler roots, such as Mr Gove and Mr Hilton, are fervent believers in things.

Of conservatism and cosmopolitanism

Mr Gove was adopted when he was four months old. All he knows about the woman who bore him is that she was a student. His adoptive parents scrimped to educate him privately. The family, which lived in Aberdeen, moved from a maisonette to the relative comfort of a semi-detached house. It is an almost cinematically Thatcherite back story, and Mr Gove still carries the convictions of the respectable, unfashionable, self-made middle class: reverence for country and military, disdain for modish educationalists and dinner-party liberals.

And yet Mr Gove is also a metropolitan culture vulture, the most literate of politicians, and distinctly unEnglish in his refusal to hide his sophistication (he is, with respect to Alex Salmond, Scotland's first minister, the most powerful Scot in Britain). Himself straight—and now married with children—he once shared a flat in Mayfair with two gay Tory modernisers. The last politician to mix conservatism and cosmopolitanism so vividly was Michael Portillo, the former Tory minister who, neatly, was the subject of a sympathetic biography by Mr Gove in 1995.

That book was called "The Future of the Right"; there are some who see Mr Gove as the inheritor of that mantle. They worry that other candidates to lead the Tories one day, such as Mr Osborne and Mr Johnson, share with Mr Cameron a patrician incomprehension of the striving classes. But Mr Gove forswears any such ambition. Even if he did not, his conspicuous intellectualism and uncompromising worldview might count against him. Some politicians are just too interesting to reach the very top.