

Laura-Jane Foley meets

Charles Clarke

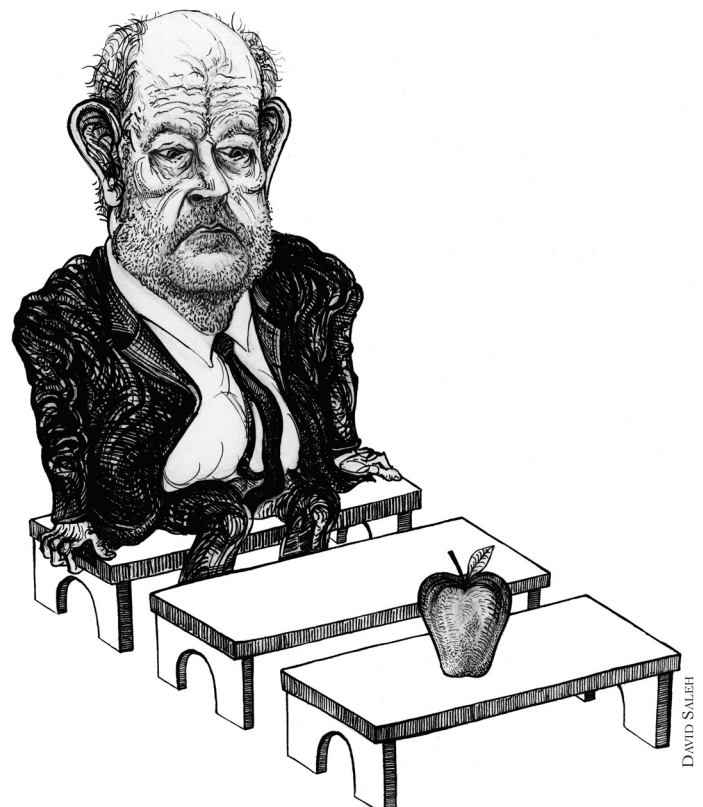
“Things have gone on but there’s nothing more I want to say about it”. Charles Clarke doesn’t want to talk about Gordon Brown. Although he does. He happily keeps talking about the Prime Minister throughout the interview. It’s just he keeps interspersing his comments with declarations that he doesn’t want to talk about him anymore. The funny thing is Clarke appears to have a lot of respect and praise for Brown so his refusnik attitude is very odd. “He’s been an outstanding Chancellor and those qualities have shone through in the current situation. I don’t think there’s anything more I particularly want to say about it. He’s a complex man, I’m a complex person. We’ve had lots of interrelationships, arguments”.

“I grew up in an era where there was an enormous range of deep injustices in the world”.

Charles Clarke was definitely grumpy. When I ask if he socializes with his fellow MPs, he tells me he lives in Norwich, “obviously by definition MPs aren’t in Norwich”.

There seems to be an anger within Clarke. Maybe it’s a dislike of interviews or maybe it’s the fire in his belly which was ignited by the injustices which made him first enter politics. “I grew up in an era where there was an enormous range of deep injustices in the world ranging from facism in Spain and Portugal, apartheid in South Africa to totalitarian Europe in the international arena to deep poverty still continuing here in the UK. Many people were still unable to make progress in their lives, there was serious discrimination

against whole sections of the population, women in particular, but also people of different sexuality and so on and I believed these things needed to change and I believed politics was the process of changing that. Democratic politics is the way to do it. So when I was at University I committed myself to the process of political change”. Clarke went to King’s College, Cambridge and served as President of the Student’s Union. He was notoriously left wing – somewhat to the left of Michael Foot was the description of him at Cambridge. He would participate in sit-ins and occupations of University buildings. Purposefully ironic thirty years later Cambridge students occupied the University’s Senate House in protest about the Top Up Fees proposed by a certain



former CUSU President. I ask Clarke whether he found it difficult as a former CUSU and NUS President to introduce the tuition fee proposals. “Not at all. I thought it was a very powerful set of proposals. Intellectually difficult and politically difficult. I think the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The system we’ve established in my opinion does stand the test of time. It’s not leading to reductions in applications to University from students from poorer backgrounds and I think it’s a good system”.

“The Labour party moves on from everybody. No political party can succeed unless it moves forward”.

Who are his political heroes? “It is always difficult to say - a question I don’t favour. The extent to which individuals contribute to change is always limited. I think the most important are those that actually change something. In domestic politics I give great credit to Aneurin Bevan because he created the health service, Barbara Castle because she created a large part of the pensions system, and Winston Churchill and Lloyd George for the 1910/1911 budget which marked the beginnings of a welfare state”.

The best Labour leader in his lifetime “has to be Tony Blair. The spade work for his victory was done by Neil Kinnock during his leadership of the Labour party. But actually the achievement of ultimately winning power for Labour has to go to Tony”. Despite his praise for Blair he is quick to point out that the Labour party is not wedded to Blair or his memory. “The Labour party moves on from everybody. No political party can succeed unless it moves forward. Political parties that look at past successes are doomed and that’s why the Conservative party had a long time of depression and difficulty after Margaret Thatcher’s departure. We absolutely have to move on and to a certain extent we are. And certainly we will. Brown’s done extremely well in recent times. Without his leadership we would have been in a far worse situation now. He has led very well. And he has enormous international respect”.

Clarke is optimistic about the prospects for Labour at the next election, “I hope Labour wins. I think it will be a difficult election because a fourth term is al-

most unheard of and it will be a very great achievement but I think it can be done”. He says that a lot of work needs to be done before then to make sure there is “a clear sense of direction for Labour. So that people understand what a Labour victory would mean”. This was one of the reasons he set up the 2020 vision website in 2007. “I believed it was critically important and still do that the party thinks what are the ways that we will confront, in a progressive way, the challenges of the era now. I thought we needed more debate around these questions and I thought the vehicle of the 2020 website would be a good means of doing it. Unfortunately it was seen as an anti Gordon Brown organisation – wrongly – and I thought it wasn’t helpful to have that tension around it so we closed it down”. But he continues to contribute “as much I can to the ability of Labour to set out a programme for Britain which can take it forward and address the problems which we face. I try to do this by giving speeches, writing articles”. Looking forward Clarke thinks David Milliband “is a very talented man... (who) will have a very major future to play in the Labour party”. But what of his own role in Labour’s history? “I’d like to be remembered as somebody who helped reform the Labour party in it’s recovery from the worst depths of despair that we’ve had in our history to a point at which we could first win power and then carry through changes. I feel proud of my own record in that regard”.

I make an attempt at a lighthearted final question. Can you describe yourself in five words? After a long pause – “warm, friendly, creative and energetic” Clarke brusquely utters. “Thanks, I think you displayed all of them today” I say. “You don’t know me” comes the response and with that I’m marched in silence to the security gates at Portcullis House.

FYI...

Charles Clarke is the Member of Parliament for Norwich South. He was Education Secretary from 2002 to 2004 and Home Secretary from 2004 to 2006. Clarke was replaced at the Home Office by John Reid in a Government reshuffle following Labour’s poor results in the 2006 local council elections. He has been a backbencher ever since.