



POLITICAL ASSASSINS

Portrait of 'The Death of Julius Caesar' (100 BC-44 BC), a Roman general who was launching a series of political reforms when his life was ended by Marcus Brutus and a group of nobles in the senate house

Words by JOSEPH BULLMORE

From time immemorial to the present day, Gentleman's Journal trawls the archives to explore the cut-throat world of politics, where shady deals are made behind the scenes and friends turn into lethal enemies in their battle to make and break party leaders

“*Beware the Ides of March*,” warned Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, his ominous saga of political betrayal gone stabby. But the Bard didn’t mention the other 11 months of the year – for cries of ‘*Et tu, Brute?*’ ring out so readily in Westminster now that outsiders probably think the entire lower house is engaged in a giant am-dram dress rehearsal of the play – albeit one bankrolled by their tax money and cast mainly from the less photogenic alumni of Eton. But the hallways of power have long been strewn with knife handles, and the script for this latest slew of assassinations was drafted long ago. This is our timeline of the political pincushions that have punctuated British politics, and the smiling double-dealers who have honed their blades in the shadows

MACMILLAN'S NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES

It's 1962, and Harold Macmillan's Conservative government is so unpopular that the old boy would be grateful for the appearance of an undergraduate pig head if only to lighten the mood. Austerity is at its most austere, the economy is at its least economical, and the men in charge all have names like Selwyn Lloyd and Reginald Maudling, which doesn't seem to help things. Inspired by the preppy youthfulness of full-time adulterer and part-time family curse dodger John F Kennedy, Macmillan decides it's time to shake up the old guard. He had meant to make his substitutions gradually over the autumn, but a leak to Lord Rothermere of the *Daily Mail* on 11 July forced Mac's reshuffle to become significantly more slashy. By the morning of the 13 July, seven intensely loyal senior ministers (a healthy 33 per cent of the reigning cabinet) had felt the business end of Macmillan's Sabatier. By the next day, the events had been named – with all the gin-flecked sensitivity of Sixties Fleet Street – after one of the Nazi party's nastier purges. One imagines Hitler, following events from his palazzo in the Venezuelan hills, spluttering indignantly over his scrambled eggs.

GEOFFREY HOWE BOWLS OUT MARGARET THATCHER

'Debating Geoffrey Howe', Denis Healey once said, 'is akin to being savaged by a dead sheep.' Softly spoken, beautifully mannered, and yet as ruthless as a sniper, Howe was the gentleman assassin of modern British politics. In his first budget as Chancellor in 1981, Howe introduced a stringent brand of austerity and conservative policy that would allow the behemoth of Thatcherism to rise from the depths and land firmly on the front lawns of middle England. Behind every great woman, apparently, is a great man. And just as Howe built Thatcher up, so, too, was he ready to tear

her down. On 13 November 1990, Howe stood up in the commons and deployed his infamous sleeping-aid tones for a missive against the leader to whom he had been loyal for more than a decade. His qualm, he claimed, was with Thatcher's treatment of her cabinet in the face of European policy: 'It is rather like sending your opening batsmen to the crease, only for them to find, as the first balls are being bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captain.' The barbarians, long at the gate, had now been let in through the larder door. 'The time has come for others to consider their own response to the tragic conflict of loyalties, with which I myself have wrestled for perhaps too long,' Howe concluded, before the chamber grew dense with a fog of similar dissent. Three weeks later, with her loyal subjects long departed and the young pretender, Heseltine, smiling murderously in the wings, Thatcher tended a tearful resignation speech at the steps of Number 10.

REDWOOD HACKED DOWN

1995: Another unpopular Conservative government, another fracas over the European Union. For many years, the Tories had been squabbling among themselves over the question of European integration, and, with the annual November leadership re-election looming, Westminster was a pit of grey-suited vipers. Sensing that things might not go his way in a fair fight, Prime Minister John Major dramatically resigned from his post in order to force a flash contest, threatening, in the street-smart tones of the Home Counties, that any opponent ought to, 'put up or shut up'. Enter, stage left, John Redwood, the formerly Major-ite Welsh Secretary best known for pretending that he knew the word's to the *Welsh National Anthem* in front of a room full of welshmen. *The Sun* newspaper (motivated, one feels, more

Following an 11-year reign, Britain's longest-serving Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, dubbed the Iron Lady, bids a tearful farewell to Downing Street on 28 November 1990 after her trusted Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, the very man who had backed her leadership, also brought about her downfall



by a love of wordplay than their support for the challenger) ran the headline ‘Redwood versus Deadwood’, and the game was on. Except, soon, it wasn’t. Redwood, who had so readily stabbed his leader in the back at the first sign of weakness, soon felt the cold pang of steel himself. When the votes came in, he received a paltry 89 ‘ayes’ to Major’s 218. The deciding factor, in the end, was the very same tabloid press that had puffed the Welsh Secretary up in the first place: as soon as the sketch writers realised that he bore more than a passing resemblance to Mr Spock, Redwood’s fate was sealed.

WIDDICOMBE POURS SUNLIGHT ON HOWARD’S CAMPAIGN

With a serial divorcée’s eye for leading men, the Conservative party was on the hunt for a new commander-in-chief just two years after the election of the last one. Michael Howard seemed the sure-fire winner in a field populated by a gout-sozzled Kenneth Clarke and a largely hairless child named William Hague. But then Ann Widdecombe, a longtime co-conspirator of Howard, put her rolling-pin finger on something that the press had been trying to articulate for several years. ‘There is,’ she said, ‘something of the night about him.’ By the time the vampiric cartoons went to press the next morning, Howard’s popularity in the party had plummeted. All that was left was for Hague, in what one presumes was his big brother’s suit, to step over Howard’s bleeding corpse and assume the position of the youngest leader of the party for 200 years.

GORDON AND TONY’S SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

The story of the Blair-Brown rift isn’t so much a single stabbing as a Hamlet-esque fencing melee, only this time Hamlet and Laertes are armed with pieces of a broken Pinot Grigio bottle, and the play is set largely in Islington. The wheels began spinning in Granita, an Italian restaurant on the north London high street in which the young Labour upstarts agreed, over a carbonara with extra garlic bread (that’s classic Brown, they know him here) that Gordon wouldn’t challenge Tony for the 1994 party leadership, so long as Tony stepped aside for the Scot in two terms’ time. Sure enough, Brown pledged his support for Blair, and the man went on to grab a landslide election victory thanks to a blatantly dishonest theme song entitled, ‘Things Can Only Get Better’. But Tony never stepped aside, and it took a Brown-led coup in 2005 for the Scotsman to regain the blood-soaked throne. Five years later, and with Gordon’s wounds still sore from the General Election defeat, Tony released a memoir in which he described his old pasta-mate as ‘a maddening fellow’ and a ‘strange guy’. Labour MP Diane Abbott decried Blair for ‘putting the knife’ into his successor, a statement that was to cut Tony himself down to size as the book became largely reviled in the press as a money-grabbing, war crime-apologising piece of opportunism.

MILIBAND OF BROTHERS

With the driving seat still smeared with the tears and giblets of a defeated Gordon Brown, the careering Labour caravan was in desperate need of a steady hand at the wheel. And few looked steadier than those of David Miliband. A handsome, suave, and thoroughly acceptable reincarnation of Blairism who was, one imagines, at least on nodding terms with a bacon sandwich, David announced his intention to stand on the 12 May 2010. Then, on 14 May, his younger brother, Ed, put forth an identical announcement. The media presumed that the result would go largely the same way as the Miliband genetic lottery, but they hadn’t accounted for one thing: young Edward had been stoking up support among the unions. Across three rounds of voting (in which third challenger Ed Balls was left swaying in the wind like a mis-sent Tweet), Red Ed closed the gap on his elder brother from a gaping margin to a single percentage point. On the final day, things at last swung in young Ed’s favour, and David was sent packing to the States with only a multi-million dollar charity directorship to console him. The pair insist there is no bad blood between them.

GOVE, JOHNSON AND THE CUCKOO NEST PLOT

As a well-varnished student of history, perhaps Boris should have seen it coming. Maudling, Heath, Heseltine, Clarke, Portillo, Howard, Davis: why might he himself not be added to that line of Tory-brand knife blocks? After being convinced by the wily Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, to join the Brexit Brigade (an act which itself stabbed old Buller comrade Cameron right in the tailcoat), Boris looked certain to be the favourite for the suddenly vacant position of Prime Minister. Gove – who was doing a broken-record impersonation with the line, ‘I do not have what it takes and I do not have the qualities to be prime minister’ – made up Johnson’s ‘Dream Ticket’, and was angling for the position of Chancellor should the dream come true. But in a carousel of treachery that featured, in the order name, a leaked email from Gove’s wife to the press; a black-tie ball at The Hurlingham; a misplaced text from Johnson; a defection from arch Brexiteer Andrea Leadsom; a late-night bottle of wine at the Gove’s Ladbroke Grove pile; a ship-jumping from one of Boris’s leading aides; and a machiavellian manoeuvre from George Osborne – everything changed. ‘There are decades in politics where nothing happens,’ said Lenin. ‘And there are weeks where decades happen.’ Swap in ‘hours’ for ‘weeks’ and that sounds about right.

Just moments after Boris had received the news that Gove had mounted a coup against him, the Johnsonite MP Nigel Evans was cornered by a marauding reporter. Asked whether ‘Mrs May had stabbed Mr Johnson in the front after Mr Gove had stabbed him in the back’, Evans said: ‘That’s about it: It makes *House of Cards* look like *Teletubbies*’. Johnson himself certainly wasn’t immune to the literary parallels. Citing the moment in Shakespeare’s Roman tragedy where Brutus (played poutily by Gove) is rinsing the blood from his hands in an attempt to consolidate his power, Johnson decreed that, ‘Now is a time not to fight against the tide of history but to take that tide at the flood and sail on to fortune.’ Put another way: this ancient pantomime shows little sign of ending its run. ■



Clockwise from left: Michael Gove and fellow Brexiteer Boris Johnson on a Vote Leave campaign visit on 6 June at Stratford-upon-Avon; Ed Miliband embraces older brother David after Ed wins the backing of the unions at the annual Labour Party Conference on 25 September 2010; Gordon Brown waits in the wings as Tony Blair celebrates being elected Labour leader on 21 July 1994

