

Blair tells it all in exclusive excerpts

What the ex-PM would say if he only could

by David Marsh

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In the biggest publishing event since Gutenberg, Tony Blair, the former British Prime Minister, launches his hotly awaited memoirs on Wednesday. Mr Blair never does anything by halves, but this time 'The Bigger Picture' has outwitted even this supremely well-paid politician-turned-international showman.

Through devious channels whose intricate byways we are not at liberty to disclose, a draft version containing Mr Blair's startling revelations over confidential British government negotiations on the European single currency has slipped eel-like into our eager hands.

With the killjoy spirit typical of the higher echelons of Her Majesty's secret service, British intelligence has slapped a publication ban on these details, deeming they are prejudicial to national security. To these ham-fisted attempts at censorship, we say: "Tommyrot!"

These excerpts are not for the faint-hearted. Yet our readers deserve nothing less than Mr Blair's unexpurgated words.

The secret memoirs. . .

"I have always supported a common European currency. In my student years I was working in various Parisian bars to gain experience of life in the raw and to improve my already excellent French. Occasionally President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing dropped by, and we talked until late into the night about the benefits of monetary integration. He put forward the view that merging the franc and the pound would multiply British tourists' participation in Parisian night life, to mutual economic benefit - a thesis that I must say impressed me deeply.

But I didn't get on at all well with his eventual successor, Jacques Chirac, with whom I made contact shortly after gaining office in 1997. When I visited him in the Elysee Palace to explain the benefits of British membership in the euro, Chirac's tone was noticeably chilly. Rather rudely, he was on the phone to Chancellor Kohl in Germany for much of the time, swapping notes in somewhat irate tones on what they called the "convergence criteria." Economic mumbo jumbo, all nonsense, plainly.

I found an ally in Bill Clinton of course. Now there's a man who could live a little and not be put in a straitjacket! But in Europe I felt let down by many of our so-called allies. Take Chancellor Kohl, for example. I told him right after I moved into Downing Street that the British would agree to abolishing the pound only if the European Central Bank was set up in London or Edinburgh under the authority of the governor of the Bank of England. For me, and certainly for Elizabeth, it was absolutely non-negotiable that the Queen's head should adorn all the banknotes, at home and abroad. And what happened to this typically selfless offer, displaying British pragmatism at its best? It was spurned. Kohl was totally ungrateful. He would have nothing of it. He seemed utterly browbeaten by the Bundesbank -- as if it was some form of sacred cow! I learned a lot from this episode. Politicians like Kohl pretend to be Europeans, but it's often only skin deep. Beneath the facade, they're all nationalists!

At the end of 1998, Kohl was replaced by dynamic Socialist leader Gerhard Schröder. I said to myself this would be a new beginning. Gerhard visited me in London immediately after taking office - even before he went to Paris! My sensitive antennae picked up some irritation, however, when I started off by offering to pray together. How unfortunate that non-religious people such as Schröder are discomfited when they come across characters like me who are so close to God.

Gerhard's approach to the euro was complicated. He was not a big fan, he told me, but the matter was out of his hands: it would arrive, come what may, on 1 January 1999. When I suggested that we postpone the whole thing and instead send freshly printed pound notes to Berlin and Frankfurt, he simply shook his head. It is irksome when we British make sacrifices in the name of Europe - and the Continentals simply do not understand the efforts we are making. All very frustrating.

And the Iraq war made everything worse. It was ridiculous that the Europeans failed to agree on our common line. And as so often in the past the Continent simply isolated itself from the British. How sad! Yet how typical!

In my efforts to build bridges across the Channel, my Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was no earthly use. Unlike me, he completely lacks any kind of charisma. But Gordon and I were at one mind on at least one point -- we both believed the euro was born around a hundred years too early.

When will the Europeans finally realise that the only people who see things in truly historical dimensions are the British?"