The Big Brown(e) Sahibs

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Given my deep affection for all things British, I had been wondering for some time whether we had not been unfair to Des Browne, in refusing to accept him as the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy to Sri Lanka. The poor man might have been hurt and I had been told by someone who had worked for him that he was comparatively one of the nicer people to have been Secretary of State for Defence, not an easy task in the midst of the British offensive against non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

Under Des Browne's kindly guidance, the British had not engaged in the massacres of Shias that had characterized their performance in Iraq in the twenties. Nor had they done the contrary, and massacred Sunnis instead, which some British political dispensations might have thought suitable compensation for their excessive support for Sunnis in the twenties and again under Saddam Hussein, seen once as the hammer of the Persians and the Shias before he got out of hand. Given his comparatively decent record, it could have been argued that, since Des was now once again willing to take up an onerous responsibility, we should have been honoured that his not quite namesake Gordon Brown had selected Sri Lanka for the purpose. Having been elevated when the big Brown became Premier to two Cabinet positions, it must have been upsetting when the boss told him that, if he could not stay the course, he might as well go away immediately. Since we already had a Malloch Brown in action, it would not have hurt us too much to have a Des as well, though a Desmond or even a Desideratus would have been more desirable, if colonial proprieties were to be observed. Imagine a Trinity of Brown(e) Sahibs, Gord and Mal and Des, all dabbling enthusiastically in Sri Lanka - those of us devoted to the old Queen, Victoria rather than Elizabeth, could not have asked for more. But as it happened, the President was much wiser than all us sentimental old anglophiles (Scots not excluded), when he decided that this was a mysterious Mr. Brown, on Agatha Christie lines, rather than the genuine article. He would come with baggage so, since the whole affair had not been formally arranged, it was best to have none of him. So poor Des had to take his baggage elsewhere. And where better than where it came from, namely the British Tamil Forum. Unfortunately for him, he had to play second fiddle there too, to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, but whereas the latter seems to have engaged in generalizations, only one of which was actually silly (comparing the 'freedom struggle of the African Americans and the Tamils), Browne went the whole hog (as in Charu Latha) and said nasty things about the Sri Lankan Government. This evidently brought great joy of his hosts, who gave him far more space in their press release than the more responsible American keynote speaker. Apart from his claim that he could not understand why the Sri Lankan government had rejected his appointment after it had been 'mutually agreed', dizzy Des said that the 'often quoted figure of 70,000 killed is a gross underestimation of the lives that have been lost as a result of war in Sri Lanka' and that 'the pressing need is the humanitarian crisis facing Tamil civilians remaining in the conflict zone'. No reference was made to what period or numbers he used for his estimate, no reference to who had kept restarting conflict despite agreements in 1987 and 1990 and 1994 and 2006, leading to the SLMM query as to whether there was in fact a Ceasefire still in existence. There was no mention of whether victims of terrorism figured in his statistics, or why Tamil civilians had been forced to remain in the conflict zone. Then, whilst he 'acknowledged that the largest number of casualties continues to be in the government declared safety zone and strongly condemned these acts of violence', he made no mention of the recorded evidence that it was the LTTE who used violence in that zone. Instead Browne claims that 'the UK government was doing everything it could to bring about a ceasefire ever since Prime Minister Gordon Brown called for it in the Parliament'. Why Des Browne should think Gordon Brown calling for a ceasefire in the British parliament should be considered relevant in Sri Lanka is anyone's guess. Perhaps this is another example of British diplomacy at its most imaginative, like David Miliband's lecture about Kashmir to the Indians. I believe none of the Brown(e)s was involved in that little gaffe, but this Browne does his share of pontificating to the Indians. Having boasted that 'he has been engaged with the US State Department, Norway and Japan', he declared that India 'needs to play a major role as the super power of the region', doubtless after they have followed the Miliband advice on Kashmir and given up their own consistent approach to terrorism. Somehow one gets the impression that the poor British are trying hard to convince the Americans that they are the experts on South Asia. So, while young Miliband sorts out Kashmir, old Browne will facilitate 'a permanent solution' in Sri Lanka, one in which 'all parties to the conflict would need to be included', i.e. the dear old Brits will resuscitate the Tigers even if defeated on the battlefield, and thus ensure that all other Tamils willing to talk are once again betrayed and killed. In short, Des Browne made it crystal clear that he would have brought to the role to which Gord Browne had sought to elevate him all the prejudices with which the Tigers have stuffed the more gullible and vote-hungry members of the Labour Party. Far from bringing to bear his 'previous experience in the conflict in Northern Ireland', far from making clear that 'it is not the British Government’s wish to enforce any solutions to the problem however he said that the parties to the conflict should resolve' (whatever that means), he would have tried to ensure that the Tigers lived to kill another day. No wonder then that he claimed that 'today’s meeting is significant'. Since he is claimed, along with all other non-Tamil speakers at the conference, to have commented that 'Unlike in the case of Darfur or even Gaza, the Sri Lankan Government expelled humanitarian agencies and international media long before the war intensified paving the way for a Genocidal war without witnesses', clearly Browne would not have been the honest broker he was presented as. I should note in this context that the British Foreign Office have confirmed that ‘Des Browne did not make any of the comments attributed to non-Tamil speakers’ and I should confirm that I never thought for a minute that he could have said such things. But surely, after the pro-Tiger claim that David Miliband had agreed that the Sri Lankan government was engaged in genocide, surely it would have been sensible for Des Browne to be cautious about supping with Tigers and their ilk. And whilst again the Foreign Office confirmed that David Miliband had not been talking about genocide in agreeing with a leading question put by one of the happy band in the House of Commons fed by the Tigers, it is noticeable that there is no commensurate public denial of the misleading claims of the Tigers. Indeed it would seem that,

by going to such an event, knowing how British leaders have been used before, Browne has nailed his colours to the mast. Perhaps he is hurt, like those journalists who claim they have to rely on dubious sources because access to the conflict zone is restricted. But, as with those journalists, their continuing misrepresentations even in the face of evidence to the contrary about the murderousness of the Tigers, are the best reason for not taking their claims of possible objectivity seriously. So, wonderfully, when the Browne diatribe concludes with the sanctimonious pronouncement that 'the nature of my job as a special envoy means that I must be neutral, so I will not answer all comments', we realize that the word neutral has a new meaning for the current government in Britain. It is also astonishing that he still describes himself as a special envoy, since it is the essence of an envoy that he must be accepted. But then, since the British Tamil Forum describes him as 'the Prime Minister’s Special Envoy to Sri Lanka', perhaps he feels he has been accepted where it matters. Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process courtesy: SCOPP