

Are Westminster's 'Grumpy Old Men' Showing Signs of the 'Andropause'?

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Their collective ages add up to 275. But official wisdom makes them forever young 'because they are in politics'. They bounce about like a quintet of Mick Jagers. For their respective parties, they live and breathe the air of novelty and reform. Their private love fetish is a pretty little adjective called NEW. Positioned for electoral advantage between old Labour and hard Tory, these men choose change for the hell of it. Whether in Government or Opposition, they have a Maoist desire to make revolution permanent. Society not broken? They'll fix it. And yet, time is taking its toll.

Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, John Prescott, Robin Cook and Iain Duncan Smith, to take random samples, are in fact a clutch of 'grumpy old men'. The current television series of the same name (Fridays, BBC2) is presented by a cast of assorted rockers, comics and actors but could it be a secret political satire on our top menopausal males? I won't be unkind and say that Will Self is even more handsome than Robin Cook, but look at the evidence.

First, our beloved Prime Minister (Bill Nighy) is having a little trouble with his internal fight-and-flight patterns and fibrillations. These are not necessarily age-related although several medical authorities have mentioned excessive stress. They aren't life-threatening but can hurt like hell and give any man of 50 pause to wonder whether he is really passing his days in a sensible fashion. The siren sounds of the Island of Mustique must be a-calling.

Second, Gordon Brown (John Peel) is in temporary relief given the joyful news of the birth of his much-wanted and desired offspring, upon which I congratulate him and even more the woman who went to all that trouble. However, let us be fair. This is a man who spends much of his time obsessively playing a gramophone record called "Roll Over Beethoven", and more than one spin doctor at Number 10 has been caught muttering about his psychological unfitness to replace the Prime Minister.

Then there's John Prescott (Alf Smith), at 65 senior to the rest, side-stepping the need for debate by punching opponents in the face and now this week calling Libby Weiner (a woman of 44 with 20 years' experience as a news reporter) a "silly girl" for asking him to justify a £1.1 million pound refit of one of his residences. He qualifies both as grumpy and sexist but, you know, a lot of pensioners are.

Robin Cook (Mr Self himself) also reminds me of Henry the Green Engine ("who went into a tunnel and squeaked through his funnel and never came out again"). Muttering into his dairy as the boiler cools and the steam rises, Robin Cook grumbles that it is unjust to find himself parked in a siding while the rest of the world surely realises he is the only one who got it right all along. Oh yes, and he doesn't like students occupying flats above his own because they disturb his VIP security with their rotten rock and roll.

Finally the Ides of Iain Duncan Smith (Richard Madeley without hair) a man more assassinated against in his own lifetime than the late Queen Victoria. Not only has he been reinvented with a new bark in the absence of bite (Tony Blair is apparently "deceitful, incompetent, shallow, inefficient, corrupt, mendacious, fraudulent, shameful, lying") the opposition leader is now prone to jerky abstract expressionist dance behaviour while giving talks to Conference. It's a St Vitus dance of those who

splutter “Do you know who I am?” to be told by fellow inmates: “No, but if you ask Matron she’ll tell you”.

In any other walk of life these men would be well aware that they are cresting the hill. It should be autumn in their personal discontent. The age of 50? All have passed it. In actuarial terms, they are on life’s pro-penultimate laps. In any parallel employment, they would feel greater job insecurity than most politicians. Even ten years ago, only 55 per cent of Britons over the age of 55 were in any form of paid employment. The equivalent figure for France was 27 per cent and for Italy just 11 per cent.

So could this be the fabled Andropause (reported at the weekend to be now deserving of NHS research resources), the male equivalent of the female menopause?

Men obviously do not have a hormonal hiatus because they never bothered to menstruate. Our hormonal production and fertility continue throughout life. However, testosterone levels in men fall from an average of 21 units (nanomols per litre) at the age 30 to 13 units at 88. Free testosterone (the important measure for drive and libido) falls from an average 42 units (nmols/l) at 30 to 18 units at 88. The question is, does this endocrine decline become critical at around the age now reached by our grumpy old politicians?

Consider the criteria of menopausal mid-life crisis in either sex. These include reduced sex drive and enjoyment, mental and physical fatigue, mood swings, depression, severe aches and pains, hot flushes, severe sweating especially at night, a sense of failure, threat of or actual loss of job, bereavement, divorce, major money anxieties, family worries, especially the children or a combination of any of these.

I leave it to your own judgement to fill in the blanks. Because if Tony doesn’t get hot flushes and Gordon isn’t worried about our money, and if John is a stranger to mood swings and Robin isn’t perturbed by his divorce, and poor old Iain hasn’t felt threatened by the loss of his job, then I’m sweet 16 again.