

Alistair Darling leaves the Brown-bashing out of his memoirs

May 11 2012

*Thinking he would be merely a 'footnote in history', ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling instead found himself at the centre of the worst banking crises in over a century. **Scott Levin** reviews Darling's autobiography **Back from the Brink** and finds he does not pull all of his punches as he adds yet another chip into the already mangled armour of Labour's post-Blair years.*

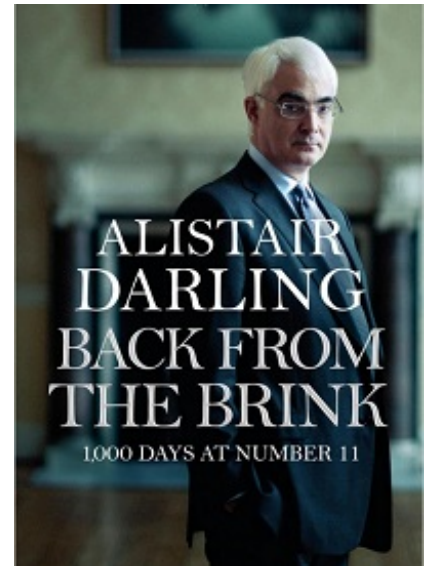


Back from the Brink: 1,000 Days at Number 11. Alistair Darling. Atlantic Books. September 2011.

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Churchill famously wrote, "A politician needs the ability to foretell what is going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month, and next year. And to have the ability afterwards to explain why it didn't happen." Of course, as the great Prime Minister knew far too well, history doesn't always unfold according to plan.

Enter a bland, dry-humored, Scottish barrister. Alistair Darling saw himself destined to be nothing more than a "footnote in political history" but perhaps the buoyant and wry economic gods had something entirely different in mind. Just months after becoming the caretaker of the treasury, the financial distress that would scar his tenure sparked into flame as the UK witnessed its first bank run since the 19th century.



Darling's *Back from the Brink* delivers the Chancellor's own measured account of the roughly one thousand days he would spend at 11 Downing Street. Beginning his tenure with the ringing endorsement that he would serve for "a year or so", the gravity of events proved great enough to ground the sniping of his temperamental boss, Prime Minister Gordon Brown. While not strutting on the Labour pig-pile that has most assuredly marred Brown's reign, Darling doesn't pull all of his punches as he adds yet another chip into the already mangled armor of Labour's post-Blair years.

Even for an unassuming American like myself, it comes across quite clearly that Darling intended to avoid the political expediency of another Brown-bashing out of a sense of party loyalty. Darling served in the cabinet for the entirety of New Labour's return to power after 1997, managing the difficult and undesirable tasks his more power conscious colleagues demurred from. This matter-of-fact accounting of his handling of the Exchequer amid the existential threats to the British banking sector only serve to reinforce the perception of Darling as one of those rare and honest politicians, trustworthy on the helm in times of national crisis.

If his memoir is a bit stiff in its retelling of each mind-numbing decision over a loan or a restructuring, Darling occasionally lightens the mood with a biting anecdote. Whether it is his fretting over whether to

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watch *Abba or Mama Mia* on the plane to meet the US President or recounting the Downing Street staffer who by some anomaly is still paid per-coffee brewed, Darling's amiable character breaks through to soften the blows of a financier's tedium.

Though Darling leaves the crucifixion of the now pariah Gordon Brown to more partisan accounts, he does offer an interesting window into his views of the still governing Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England. Darling makes it evidently clear that he and King failed to see eye to eye on a range of issues during the crisis, from King's initial refusals to inject the fledgling economy with cash to his impromptu bumbling into politics and policy. Alistair writes, "Mervyn was careful to cover his pronouncements with caveats, which usually went unreported, but even so he was coming perilously close to crossing a line between legitimate comment and entering the political fray."

Instead of serving as the doormat for Gordon Brown's protégé at the Exchequer Ed Balls, Darling's smooth management and prescient insight into the economy more often than not flew ahead of the curve of his rivals. As the cabal around Brown slowly constricted to strangle the last life out of one of the architects of Labour's revival, Darling managed to fight off the mercurial impediments of his next-door neighbor and deliver what in retrospect appear to be quite reasonable budgets and respectable policy.

Many of the pressing questions of the Brown-Blair era are left unanswered. Assumedly this is because Darling wished to enhance his image as an impartial technocrat in the eyes of British political aficionados. Little detail is offered into the change of power in 2007 or why no one failed to pull Brown off the wheel as he steered Labour off a cliff. Still, Darling's charm at times slowed me from skimming through what seemed like an endless line of calamitous financial doppelgangers snaking through the pages like a line outside of a Northern Rock branch in 2007.

As Labour made for the exit in 2010, Darling offered few kind words for the strategies of his Tory successors. Having toiled to extricate the UK from the grips of the most devastating recession in decades, he does little to disguise his aversion to stringent austerity. As we now turn to the sharp, flesh-ravaging teeth of a double-dip recession, it appears Mr. Darling had his eye on the ball, at least in the short-run.

While there are undoubtedly more sophisticated accounts of the financial crisis of 2008 and political hatchet jobs that will ensconce a reader with greater suspense, Darling's account is readily digestible and unabashedly even mannered. His finale at 11 Downing Street speaks for itself, "Tradition demanded that I left a bottle of wine for my successor, which I did, with a note wishing him the best of luck. I have to report that it was a good bottle of wine – modestly priced, in keeping with the times we lived in."

Scott Levin is currently enrolled in the LSE's two year MPA program. Previously, Scott worked for Jeanne Shaheen's successful US Senate campaign and subsequently spent two years working for the US Senate Foreign Relations and Rules and Administration Committees. Scott has studied counter-insurgency at the US National Defense University and has been a fellow with the bipartisan group Partnership for a Secure America. [Read more reviews by Scott.](#)

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