

Robert Kilroy-Silk writes...on Tony Blair - Living on Fantasy Island

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Tony Blair lives in a strange country. It's call 'fairy-tale' land. Is certainly not the country that I inhabit. It is not the country that my constituents in the East Midlands recognise.

The Prime Minister dwells in a country where everything is apparently fine and dandy. The people are prosperous, happy, 'winners', he says, though what that means is not clear. The schools are effective, the hospitals clean, pensioners are contented and crime at a minimum.

Very strange. None of us can find this place on the map, not on the map of Great Britain, we can't. It might exist in the never-never-land of his over-fertile imagination, in his dreams, but the Ordnance Survey have not yet mapped it.

The country that we actually live in every day of the week is one where millions of pensioners live in poverty on means-tested benefits, where 21,800 of them died last year of hypothermia, where four out of every ten elderly patients admitted to hospital were suffering from malnutrition, and where millions of them struggle to pay their exorbitant Council Tax.

Tony Blair's real Britain is one in which the gap between the rich and the poor has actually widened since 1997. It is where the proportion of working age childless adults in poverty has risen from 25% in 1994 to 31% in 2002 and where the number of children brought up in poverty - 3.8 million - is way above the E.U. average.

This is the country where dirty hospitals are responsible for the death of over 5,000 people every year from MRSA, where students are forced into massive debt and where 'hard-working families', at whom the Prime Minister was clearly aiming his election manifesto, are over-taxed. It is the country where the roads are congested, and the train and postal systems chaotic and inadequate.

This is the Britain that too many people experience, not that of the rosy picture painted by the Prime Minister to his less than adoring party conference. The country they recognise is that in which the shop windows are boarded up at night to protect them from juvenile ram-raiders. It is the country where they afraid to go into the town centre in the evening for fear of being harassed by drug-crazed youths or threatened by drink-emboldened jobs. It is the country where the estates are terrorised by joyriders and gangs of youths, where ASBOs fly around like confetti, and where the police, though there are more of them, are never seen or do not act.

This, unfortunately, is the real Britain that many people are compelled to live in. Maybe it explains the record number Tony Blair's 'hard-working families' leaving it to make a decent life elsewhere.

The country will not be changed by somebody talking grandiloquently of a 'progressive consensus' or 'an opportunity society' or similar vacuous claptrap. It will only be dealt with by people who understand the problem, who eschew fine but meaningless words, and who act in a determined and coherent manner.

It will not be Tony Blair. He clearly has the ability to convince himself that what he wants to believe is actually true - as when he insisted that he had personally voted to ban hunting when he hadn't, that the Lords had blocked the Bill when they hadn't, and that Iraq had 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' when it didn't.

Tony Blair lives in another universe, on a different planet. He is in a world of his own. It is called Fantasy Island - and not even his ten election promises will turn it into reality.