

Blair tells British Labour Party conference, "The honeymoon is over"

Editorial Board
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Britain's week-long Labour Party conference was an unseemly spectacle. The affair was organised as a US-style convention, with £1.5 million spent to ensure the smooth presentation of media sound bites, with no possibility for dissenting voices being heard.

While major companies had free rein to advertise their wares--right down to the Sommerfield supermarket chain sponsoring conference name tags--delegates had no right to determine party policy. Those in attendance were vetted before they could speak and herded into closed sessions, providing the only opportunity to question their leaders, because this was safely away from the media. A list of delegates' names was discovered against which biographical details were appended to indicate their reliability. Descriptions included 'Trot', 'politically correct--Black' and 'needs a friend'.

Prior to Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's speech rejecting the re-nationalisation of the railways, female flight attendants from Virgin--also a private rail operator--offered delegates free massages. This was perhaps the most graphic illustration of New Labour's relations with the major corporations.

Not surprisingly, most media commentators drew the conclusion that Labour was effectively a new Tory party--and loved them for it. Many drew favourable comparisons between Blair and Thatcher. The most gushing was *The Guardian*, which commented that 'the combination of leader and party in comparative harmony, coupled with an understanding of the requirements of government, is formidable indeed'.

What did big business get in return for its endorsement of the Labour government? Trade and Industry Minister Peter Mandelson told delegates that private enterprise 'offers the only way ahead'. A 'third industrial revolution' will reach into 'every shop floor and office', he declared.

Blair promised that, despite fears of national recession, Labour will not be pushed into regulating industry, but will continue as a 'pro-business, pro-enterprise' government. Echoing former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's

famous 'no U-turn' speech, he promised there would be 'no backing down'.

The few policy measures announced were uniformly reactionary. Blair promised the most fundamental reform of teaching since state education began. This included teachers being paid 'by results', the closure of 'failing schools' and the replacement of teachers by classroom assistants.

Education Minister David Blunkett attacked teachers opposed to the measures as a 'miserable bunch of sneering cynics'. Great emphasis was laid on Labour's 'zero tolerance of crime' policy, which includes curfews on children, parenting orders and 'targeted policing' in 20 pilot 'hot spots'.

If one were to accept the media's presentation of the event, Blair would seem to be unassailable. Yet his speech indicated the opposite. Much of it was defensive, warning his party that the honeymoon was over.

The Labour government faced many challenges, he stressed on a dozen separate occasions. Its greatest was to meet the reality of the global market. To emphasise the enormity of the task Labour faced, Blair said: 'A world so fast, so competitive that 90 per cent of new products are off the market within two years of being launched. Markets so powerful that they trade more in a day--\$1.3 trillion--than the reserves of every government in the world put together. A world where 40 of the top 100 economies today are not countries, but companies. A world where the spectre of a global economic crisis--25 percent of the world in recession--now leaps on the back of change, spinning the world faster still. It is as if capitalism has found its own version of permanent revolution. And with it, traditional society fractured and torn.'

As a result of their policies, Blair warned that Labour must be prepared to be hated, and yet not be distracted from its course: 'There will be attacks to the left of you, attacks to the right of you, attacks from behind and in front. Welcome to government...

'When you make reform, people will oppose you. They will stand up at public meetings and be applauded for attacking you. When you reform welfare, they will say you

are betraying the poor. When you tackle crime, it will be an affront to civil liberties. When you take on inflation, you will be destroying industry'.

What enables Blair to openly state that his government will prove extremely unpopular with the mass of working people? One reason is his faith in the media to get him through. However, the gap between media spin and public perception is becoming so great that something must give way. Whilst the press eulogised Blair as a colossus bestriding the country, a leaked document written by Greg Cook, the party's polling expert, predicted that Labour was likely to lose 2,000 of the 6,000 seats it will defend in next May's Local Authority elections.

A more significant factor is the impotence of Blair's supposed opponents on the Labour left. At the beginning of conference week, his allies sounded warnings about the possible damage resulting from left victories in the National Executive Committee (NEC) elections and a bruising from the trade unions on the conference floor. None of this materialised.

The left in the party was thoroughly cowed. Its leading lights, such as Tony Benn, were never heard. Dennis Skinner lost the seat on the NEC he had held for almost two decades. With a few grumbles, the trade union barons queued up to lavish praise on their leader. The Trades Union Congress president, John Edmonds, stated he wanted an end to conflict with government. 'We need to reach a lasting settlement that is accepted across all industry and also across every political party...The future lies in constructive partnership and that should be recognised not just by enlightened managers and progressive trade unions, but even by--dream on!--Conservative Central Office.'

The absence of conference proposals for even the mildest social reforms prompted comment from the *Times* columnist Simon Jenkins. 'The Labour Party', he pronounced, 'is dead, deceased, expiration, defunct, gone to its maker, a party no more. A quite different party is trading under its name'.

He queried why Blair seemed so defensive, given that, 'I see only the trade unions deflated, Clare Short muzzled, Dennis Skinner flattered, *Tribune* and the *New Statesman* smothered with kisses. The once-feared National Executive Committee trots along the promenade on a sponsored lead, a white poodle with a pink ribbon in its hair. Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone have been shut in a kennel. For sheer political control, this is all amazing. Stalin needed the gulags to achieve it... The Labour Party has been a pushover'.

The Labour left's political bankruptcy has facilitated the party's right-wing evolution. When Thatcher came to power in 1979 she began restructuring economic and social life in Britain in line with the requirements of global capital. She

ended state regulation of industry and the financial markets, opened the economy up to the transnational corporations and began to dismantle expensive social provisions.

Though this met significant opposition from the working class, the Labour lefts and the trade unions were incapable of providing a socialist alternative. Their goal was not the abolition of the profit system, but of regulating capital within a national framework. Globalisation removed the mechanisms through which this could be achieved. International financiers and the transnational corporations no longer tolerated any such restrictions on their exploitation of the working class.

Whilst a handful of Labour lefts, like Livingstone and Benn, settled down as the party's loyal opposition--harking back wistfully to a bygone era of social consensus--many more were recruited to the 'modernisation' project undertaken by successive Labour leaders. Despite constant references to 'yuppie interlopers', the leading lights in New Labour are generally the same as in 'old' Labour--Prescott, Cook, Short, Blunkett, Dobson.

Blair tells working people that the pill he offers is bitter but must be taken in order to survive. At any rate, he continues, echoing Thatcher, there is no alternative. Certainly there is none from within the Labour Party.

But Blair is an apparatchik who believes all that is necessary is 'to show the same resolution in changing the country as we did in changing the Labour Party'. This will prove his undoing. As Jenkins concludes in his comment, if things continue like this, an alternative party will be built to defend all those abandoned by this government.

Workers' patience with Labour is already wearing thin. However many times they swallow the medicine, the cure never works. Downsizing, companies uprooting to cheaper production locations, ever-more ferocious competition for markets, the erosion of living standards are increasingly a permanent fixture for many. What is missing is a viable political alternative that articulates the independent interests of working people against those of big business: one which opposes to Blair's defence of global capitalism, the unification of workers across national borders in the struggle for social equality.



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