Labour's European election debacle raises the spectre of the class divide in Britain

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The British Labour Party's disastrous showing in the European Parliament elections two weeks ago has provoked turmoil among party and government officials.

In 1997 Labour ousted the Conservative Party from power in Westminster by gaining 44 percent of the vote. In the European elections, which saw a massive rate of abstention, only 6 percent of the electorate voted Labour, compared to 8 percent for the Tories. It was Labour's worst election result since 1983, creating panic and disbelief within the party and the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The record-low turnout and the defeat for Blair, coming at the end of the Balkan War, reflected the enormous unease among working people in Britain over the bombing assault on Yugoslavia, which Blair had sought to make his personal crusade. Far from NATO's one-sided victory giving Blair an electoral boost in the European elections, the war had, if anything, the opposite effect.

But Labour's dismal showing expressed a more general reaction within the working class to the policies of the Blair government. Blair had insisted the European elections be fought as a personal popularity contest between himself and Tory leader William Hague. Election broadcasts featured shots of Blair in various poses, accompanied by a voice-over emphasising the outstanding qualities of “our leader”.

In the end, the overwhelming majority of voters decided they did not like either Hague or Blair very much. Just over 20 percent of the electorate voted, the lowest turnout in a national poll since 1945. In former Labour strongholds abstentions were as high as 90 percent. This enabled the Tories to have the edge, despite remaining deeply unpopular.

Where Labour had held a lead of 20 percent or more in 1997, its share of the vote fell by 22 points. In the Prime Minister's and Deputy Prime Minister's own constituencies, just 20 percent and 12 percent of the electorate turned out.

Less than 24 hours after polling stations had closed, and as the enormous abstention rate became clear, Blair convened an emergency meeting comprising various “spin doctors” and party leaders. Ian McCartney, the Trade and Industry Minister, was given the task of winning back support and it was agreed that Blair should undertake a tour of the country next month.

Blair and a phalanx of party apparatchiks then went on air saying that the poll showed the “culture of contentment” in Britain. People were so happy with everything the government had done, they felt they had no reason to vote! This is a remarkable claim, given that Blair has presented his leadership as the epitome of “people's power”. Now he asserts that the absence of “the people” from the electoral process proved his government's success.

Blair's attempts at damage limitation notwithstanding; discussion on Labour's vote has become focussed on the central issue which he claimed to have almost single-handedly removed from British politics—class. New Labour, Blair has argued, marks an end to the days in which political discourse was seen in terms of a struggle between contending social interests. He pronounced the class struggle to be the outcome of a tragic misunderstanding, produced by certain peculiar conditions at the beginning of this century. Through New Labour, Britain would finally be able to put a stop to all such nonsense, uniting big business and “the people” on the basis of common aspirations and interests.

Blair sought to complete Labour's break with the working class, ditching the party's former commitment

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to social reforms. Labour's 1997 electoral victory, which provided Blair with an overwhelming majority thanks to gains in traditionally Tory seats, was cited as proof that New Labour's "coalition of interests" worked.

But the benefits have been entirely one-sided. Whilst big business and the rich have been given one of the lowest tax regimes and wage costs in Europe, many workers face increasing hardship. Labour has imposed strict public spending limits, held down public sector wages and cut welfare and social programmes to the bone. Its imposition of a £3.60 minimum wage has set a new benchmark for cheap labour. Workers no longer have rights to provision during unemployment, ill health or retirement. Instead they have the "responsibility" to provide for themselves.

Far from being content, many working people are deeply resentful. Internal Labour Party reports cite party activists having to field off complaints from many who now see no differences between the main parties, and who believe that whatever interests Blair says he represents, theirs are not amongst them. Labour MP Denis Murphy bluntly admitted that in working class neighbourhoods "the perception is that this is a right-wing government".

McCartney's first remarks in his new post inadvertently confirmed the depth of alienation that exists in former Labour strongholds. Attempting to deflect responsibility for Labour's low poll away from the leadership, he revealed that the problem at constituency level is one of "moribund parties, lack of training in campaigning and little involvement in the community". In other words, not only has New Labour lost much of its traditional base of electoral support, but the party organisation is in terminal decline. Reports indicate that Labour's diminishing membership believes Blair dislikes them, and that the feeling is increasingly mutual.

All of this has prompted sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to warn the government to proceed more cautiously. The collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracies in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the ensuing declaration of the "end of socialism" convinced the Labour leadership that any opposition from the left had been discredited. The view developed that, whatever Labour did, the working class had no other political home to go to.

John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB union, echoed this outlook last week when he cautioned Blair, "It's not a problem of the Labour vote going somewhere else but, if you're not careful, the Labour vote will just stay at home." His remarks followed those of TUC General Secretary John Monks last weekend that Labour should stop treating its core voters as "embarrassing elderly relatives". In Wales, where discontent with Labour has enabled the previously small Welsh nationalists of Plaid Cymru to make significant gains, party leaders have made similar complaints.

Blair's critics have no alternative to present, as they are all in favour of rationalising welfare and keeping wages down to ensure Britain's competitiveness on the world market. But they fear Blair's constant evoking of business interests only serves to emphasise the growth of social antagonisms that are best concealed.

Many political commentators have begun to question whether Blair's "New Labour" project can really succeed under conditions of a growing class divide. Was Blair's success in 1997 really attributable to New Labour's popularity, they ask, or was Blair merely the beneficiary of enormous hatred for the Tories? Is it really possible to tackle Britain's growing social problems whilst mollycoddling the rich? And if Labour is no longer in favour of redistributive policies to help the disadvantaged, what is there to distinguish them from the Tories—and why shouldn't they meet the same fate?

Blair's response has been to insist that there will be more of the same. His attempts to forge a new "synthesis uniting previously opposed elements of UK political life" remains valid, he argues. "It is as New Labour we were elected. It is as New Labour we govern and will continue to govern," he said. Symbolically, he chose a publicity launch for the government's workfare "New Deal" programme to make this announcement. The issue, he claimed, was simply one of "perception", or, as one Labour official put it, how to persuade people that their glass is "not half empty, but half full".

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