

Britain's Labour Party celebrates hundredth anniversary amidst gathering storm clouds

Chris Marsden
3 March 2000

There was an unreal aspect to the Labour Party's hundredth anniversary celebrations last weekend. At a gathering to mark the meeting that led to the founding of the Labour Party on February 27, 1900, Tony Blair hailed Labour as the "civilising force" of the twentieth century and promised greater things for the twenty-first. However, most of the 1,000 party *apparatchiks* present were more concerned with Labour's current difficulties.

An opinion poll this month in the *Daily Telegraph* noted that support for the Labour Party has dropped below 50 percent for the first time since the general election in 1997—from 53 to 49 percent. But this is only part of the picture. In local elections and by-elections held in the major metropolitan areas, turnout has slumped to as little as 20 percent, with most of those staying away being traditional working class Labour voters. As a result, Labour has lost control of councils in major cities such as Liverpool and Sheffield to the Liberal Democrats. In the first by-election this year, in Wales, less than half the registered voters turned out, and Labour slumped to fourth place behind the Tories.

A recent study by the Economic and Social Research Council shows a 16 percent fall in support for Labour amongst the working class in Scotland since 1997. This swell of alienation is also leaving its mark on the party itself. A report this month by two Sheffield academics points out that Labour has lost 70,000 members since the general election, and that its active membership has declined from a half to a third.

Criticism of Blair and his right-wing policies has become ever more vocal, even from previously loyal forces. Last month, former minister Peter Kilfoyle resigned from the government, warning that Labour was losing the support of the working class and that the resulting "social dislocation" could lead to a "resurgence of extremism" from the left and the right. Two MPs from the Northeast, Doug Henderson and Fraser Kemp, this month warned that the region's core Labour voters might desert the government because it appeared to care more about its "southern middle class" supporters.

The campaign to chose a Labour candidate for the newly-created post of an elected London mayor became a plebiscite on New Labour's policies, with a massive majority of ordinary members voting for Brent East MP Ken Livingstone. Blair's chosen candidate, Frank Dobson, won a rigged selection process, but felt so exposed that he pledged to oppose government plans to privatise the London Underground and attacked the Labour leadership as "prats".

Blair's centenary speech was a factionally motivated gallop through Labour's history, delivered with the aim of silencing his critics. Its message could be summed up as: "Do as you are told and we remain in government, or buck my leadership and suffer another period in opposition."

As far as Blair is concerned, what was positive at the time of Labour's founding was that "the delegates meeting in 1900 rejected class war" in favour of "blend[ing] the classes into one human family," as its first leader Keir Hardie said. Blair listed the party's successes—providing political representation for working people in parliament, votes for women and the creation of the National Health Service after 1945—before getting down to the serious business of cowing his own members.

The rank-and-file members were "the biggest heroes of all" because they "stuck with us through the bad times as well as the good". But it was wrong for them to expect radical social measures. "Throughout our history, radicalism has too often been followed by long periods of Conservative rule," Blair warned. "When we have won, we have established a broad coalition of support, from all walks of life, all parts of the country. When we have lost, we have retreated to a narrow base."

He paid tribute to the leader of the party's right wing in the mid-1950s, Anthony Crosland, who was the first to advocate that Labour ditch its commitment to state ownership of industry and socialised production enshrined in "Clause Four" of the party's constitution. "His views were not sufficiently heeded in the next 30 years and by the 80s what fell by the wayside was our ability to speak for the people."

Blair remedied this by removing Clause Four, reinventing the party as an advocate of the free market and winning the support of disillusioned middle class Conservative voters. Now internal dissent was threatening these achievements. The motivation of this opposition "is different" from the Conservatives. It calls for "a more leftist Labour government ... but unwittingly they help spread the seeds of disillusion, which the right can harvest".

Blair's political wisdom is summed up in his comment that James Callaghan, Labour Prime Minister between 1976 and 1979, "had he been given the time to succeed, would have been one of the great Prime Ministers of the 20th Century". This was prevented by the militant strike-wave known as the "Winter of Discontent". Blair failed to point out that the strike wave was provoked by Callaghan's attempts to impose austerity measures and a wages ceiling dictated by the IMF.

The current prime minister looks upon the party's previous commitment to social reforms as an unfortunate error and has frequently described the split with Britain's Liberals in the first part of the century as a tragic mistake. It is worthwhile contrasting his view of Labour's history with that of Shirley Williams. Now a Liberal Democratic peer, Williams was a minister under Callaghan and one of the "Gang of Four" leading Labourites who broke away to found the Social Democratic Party in 1981.

The SDP was, in many ways, an anticipation of the trajectory pursued by Blair more than a decade later. It called for the ditching of social ownership, the Labour Party/trade union link and an orientation towards Europe. But unlike Blair, her views were shaped during a period in which the working class made its political and social weight known and she is far clearer on why it had been necessary for the party to advance reformist measures.

When Labour was founded, she explained, "Marxism's influence was off-set by the influence of Christian socialism, so what you got was a very British kind of democratic socialism, which was supportive of democratic institutions and was not revolutionary, but dependent on incremental reform working."

Later, "that reform was shaken by the MacDonald governments and the depression, where, for a short time, it looked like there would be a strong impetus behind the more revolutionary tradition of socialism." And again, "After the [Second World] war, when there was potential for revolutionary feeling, you got the relative success of the Attlee government ..."

The gulf opening up between the Labour Party and the broad mass of the working class is as potentially explosive as Kilfoyle earlier indicated, and Williams understands this. The essential function of Labour's advocacy of reforms through parliament—the radicalism decried by Blair—was to prevent the discontent of working people from threatening the existing social order. Her fear is that when this prospect is no longer advanced by even a significant oppositional current within the Labour Party, while the gap between rich and poor grows daily, it becomes more difficult to contain the class struggle and prevent Marxism from winning a broader audience.

New Labour's "dedication to the concept of the redistribution of income and wealth is much less clear than it used to be," she warns. "I would see a democratic socialist party as one that would have a commitment to a degree of distribution and would include global distribution. It would be recognition that if the gap between rich and poor has grown in Britain then the gap between rich and poor globally has grown out of all possible justification. So the big issue we will see in the future is how we face up to this."

Williams, and others more ostensibly left-wing such as Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill, who call for a return to an old-style reformist programme, offer no viable alternative for the working class. They are incapable of explaining why social democratic parties the world over took the same path as New Labour during the 1980s and 1990s.

The Labour Party was born out of the striving of the working class for political representation in order to combat the attacks on trade union rights and advance its social conditions. But its leadership—drawn from the Independent Labour Party, Fabian Society, and Christian socialists, and resting on the trade union

bureaucracy—was opposed to any struggle by working people that threatened the survival of the profit system and the rule of capital.

Aside from the occasional holiday speech, Labour's watchword was the amelioration of social inequality rather than its elimination, class compromise rather than class struggle. Whenever it became necessary, reforms were sacrificed for the "greater good" (of big business's profits) and Labour came forward as the policeman of social discontent.

The party's ability to combine a defence of capitalism with the advocacy of various quasi-socialist measures was only possible due to Britain's role as a world power. The exploitation of the world's markets and resources enabled the British ruling class to grant certain concessions to working people at home in order to preserve social peace.

Labour's break with social reformism is not due to the subjective whim of Blair and a few party leaders. Rather, the past two decades have seen the culmination of a global economic transformation that has ended forever the ability of the capitalist class to carry out the type of national economic regulation that was the essential foundation of Labour's old programme.

Today, the global character of production, distribution and exchange determines all aspects of economic and political life. Corporations and countries alike stand or fall on their ability to maintain a globally competitive position. Economic survival depends on winning a share of world markets and attracting investment by huge transnational corporations. This demands the ever more ruthless exploitation of working people—slashing wages and social spending. And this is what the once reformist parties must now deliver, by attacking the social and political gains secured by workers over the previous century.

There are many indications that the Blair government is coming into conflict with broad sections of the working class. But the defence of the social and political interests of working people cannot be accomplished through a retreat to a defunct policy of national economic organisation. Providing decent education, housing, health care and jobs for all can only be accomplished by subordinating the immense productive forces created by humanity and organised on a world scale to this task. This requires the building of a new type of party, capable of uniting the struggle of workers across all national boundaries and committed to the realisation of social equality. It means advancing the Marxist perspective that the Labour Party opposed from its inception.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact