

# Britain: Labour's second term presages social and political conflict

9 June 2001

The campaign for the general election has been routinely described as lacklustre, somewhat boring and largely a foregone conclusion. Its final days have seen the Conservatives appealing to voters to burst Tony Blair's bubble by not giving Labour the landslide victory predicted by the media. But all this has done is confirm the marginalisation of the Tories, who show no signs of recovering from their disastrous showing in 1997, which gave Labour a record majority.

So based on the surface appearance, there seems to be every reason to accept the common media viewpoint. But it would be wrong to do so. It is often difficult to appreciate the full and lasting significance of events while you are passing through them, particularly when for a number of years political life appears to have been ploughing the same old furrow, without major upset.

Following Thatcher's election in 1979, workers in Britain passed through 18 years of Conservative rule, during which rightwing economic and social nostrums became the norm. Many hoped that Labour's coming to power in 1997 would bring change, but it did not. Things did not get better, as Labour's election slogan promised, they only got worse.

In its fundamentals, despite Blair's hype promising a political "Third Way", Labour has continued where Thatcher left off. Pro-business free market policies and the rubbishing of the post-war policies of social reform are the order of the day. Major corporate interests and the media now see Labour as being the better Conservative party.

Labour's most memorable poster during its campaign was one of Tory leader William Hague, with his normally bald head sporting Margaret Thatcher's stiffly lacquered hairdo. Labour was clearly playing its strong suit, when it warned underneath, "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

The *Economist* magazine adapted Labour's own propaganda, picturing Blair with Thatcher's hairdo and urging its readers to "Vote conservative", meaning vote Labour as the true heir of Thatcher's political legacy. The journal was not alone. Both the *Financial Times* and the *Times* came out for Blair. The ruling elite and its media had a choice between a Tory Party in ruins or a Labour Party in name only, which they trusted to implement Tory policies—far more of a choice than is presented to working people.

It is the apparently untrammelled victory of big business—its unchallenged monopoly over political life—that in fact lends this election a historic, indeed seminal character. As we have insisted, a situation in which the working class—the vast majority of the population—has been disenfranchised, left without a voice or means of influencing society, is a recipe for explosive political shifts and social conflicts.

For more than two decades, workers have seen their living standards eroded, their democratic rights curtailed. And now they are being told—expect more of the same, and worse to come. No one will resign himself or herself to such a fate, and make no mistake, no one has. I would like to draw attention to a number of aspects of this election that all point to major changes on the horizon, the significance of which we, as socialists, must understand, and prepare ourselves for.

Firstly, consider the widespread alienation of the working class from its traditional party and from the parliamentary process itself. Voter

participation in this election will be at an all-time low. Abstentions will be even higher amongst young people.

Secondly, every time Blair has stepped outside the carefully staged meetings of the party faithful, he has been confronted by intense anger and bitterness over Labour's neglect of the National Health Service, or the withdrawal of mandatory student grants and the levying of tuition fees, or the insulting 75 pence rise in the state pension.

The media, of course, treats these incidents as an amusing sideshow, a bit of spice in an otherwise bland political soup. Well, they should rightly be seen as the main event, or at least an anticipation of it. They say more about the real temper of the working class than all the media commentary bemoaning the general state of political apathy and complacency.

If apathy and complacency really ruled the roost, it would take the form of a vote for Blair. But it does not. Disgust and contempt would be a better description of the feelings of many towards Labour and the entire official political establishment.

We have for several years now insisted that Labour's abandonment of its old reformist policies has changed its relationship to the working class. As Marxists, we recognised that Labour's ditching of its formal commitment to social ownership prior to the 1997 general election was a political declaration of intent and highlighted the need to construct a genuine socialist party. But as is always the case, people's understanding lags behind objective events. In 1997 there was still a significant residual loyalty to Labour amongst broad sections of workers, and the party was able to exploit a certain degree of good will that greeted its election.

That good will has been exhausted. Relatively few workers would still regard Labour as their party, and those that do are mainly to be found amongst the over 65s.

The high degree of working class alienation from Labour has immense political significance. What has been the central issue facing socialists in Britain? The Labour Party. The task of breaking the working class from its national reformist outlook and developing a new axis of struggle based upon socialist internationalism and the scientific world outlook of Marxism.

Therefore we understand the discrediting of the Labour Party as one of the most potentially revolutionary political developments in Britain. It objectively creates a tremendously favourable opportunity to win the most politically astute workers and youth to a new and genuine socialist programme and leadership.

We are not alone in recognising this possibility. The more conscious sections of the ruling class fear the social and political implications of the undermining of Labour's hold over the working class.

Consider this. If it is true that there are two Conservative parties standing in this election—one of them being New Labour—then one can also say there are a half-dozen or so parties competing with each other to fill the shoes so recently abandoned by Labour.

There are, of course, important political distinctions between the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru. But they are all standing in this election based on promises of a type of watered

down social reforms associated with the mainstream of the Labour Party, or more correctly its old right-wing.

The Liberal Democrats were formed through the merger of the now defunct Social Democratic Party, a right wing breakaway from the Labour Party in 1980, and the Liberals, the capitalist party from which the founders of the Labour Party broke at the turn of the last century. Taking this into account, one can see the significance of their present efforts to position themselves to Labour's left.

It would be wrong to see the stance of the Liberal Democrats and others as simply an expression of crude electioneering. Of course it is. The Liberals are in coalition with Labour in Scotland and Wales and would like nothing better than to translate an increased vote into a bargaining chip in order to secure a similar arrangement in Westminster. But they and others within the camp of the bourgeoisie are also aware that social tensions are rising and you ignore this at your peril.

The Labour Party and the trade unions have functioned as the main defenders of British capitalism from the threat of social revolution emerging in the working class. They did so by diverting the class struggle into safer channels—offering a programme of social reforms legislated through parliament that would curb capitalism's worst excesses.

With that possibility no longer available, then the class struggle must take on new and, for the ruling class, far more dangerous forms. That is why there are efforts being made to breathe the semblance of life into a reformist perspective.

It is in this context that the significance of the decision by the majority of Britain's radical groups to form a joint electoral slate and stand against Labour must be judged. The Socialist Alliance (SA) is made up of groups that have orbited the fringes of the Labour Party, or who buried themselves in it for decades. As late as 1997, they were all calling for a Labour vote—the Socialist Workers Party's main slogan at the time was “Vote Labour, but don't trust Blair.” They were far more active and enthusiastic supporters of Labour than most ordinary Labour Party members. Their divorce from Blair's party has been a reluctant and painful process for them. Standing against Labour was the last thing any of them wanted to do, but they clearly felt they had no choice. To continue their old line was impossible because no socialist-minded worker would have given them the time of day given Labour's right wing policies.

They do not represent a progressive or genuine alternative to Labour, even now. Their aim is to renew workers' illusions in reformism—claiming that the answer to Blair's right wing policies is a return to a left version of Labour's policies during the post-war period. They have not broken from their long-held perspective of working to subordinate the working class to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. The SA's constituent parties insist that the trade unions are not the same as Blair's party, despite the fact that the union bureaucracy has marched in lock-step with Blair. They offer themselves up as a new home for trade union bureaucrats disenchanted with Labour. They propose a similar arrangement for disgruntled Labour MPs and call for a vote of Labour “lefts” where SA candidates are not standing.

The other party standing candidates and proclaiming itself a left alternative to Labour is the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), led by National Union of Mineworkers' President Arthur Scargill.

Scargill was instrumental in engineering the greatest industrial defeat suffered by the British working class during the 1980s. In the 1984 miners' strike, Scargill refused to challenge the isolation of his 180,000 members by the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, and kept them out for a year of terrible hardship before the majority were sacked and their pits closed.

Publicly he advances his party as an old-style Labour formation, but behind closed doors he and his leading members discuss the SLP as the heirs of the greatest political criminal in the history of the workers' movement—Joseph Stalin. He advances a brand of unreconstructed

Stalinism and believes that everything went downhill following Khrushchev's secret speech in 1956 detailing just some of Stalin's crimes. He could not join with the other radical left groups in the SA because he and a large number of his leading members are pathological anti-Trotskyists.

The SLP's second in command, Harpal Brar, is also the head of the Stalin Society, which recently held a public meeting celebrating the Moscow Trials during the 1930s. The meeting proclaimed that the destruction of the majority of the leading cadre of Lenin's Bolshevik party by Stalin was not justified through show trials and false confessions, but represented a faultless example of jurisprudence in which everyone convicted was a counterrevolutionary. One member of the audience insisted that there was still a place for “purges” in the workers' movement.

Neither the Socialist Alliance nor the SLP are pledges for the future. One harks back to a supposed golden age of reformism, the other to the political nightmare that was Stalin's Russia.

The Labour Party's transformation into the favoured party of big business, combined with the role played by the trade unions as the extended arm of corporate management, has left the working class politically disenfranchised to an extent not seen since the birth of the workers' movement. This must inevitably open a period of political reappraisal on the part of the most thoughtful workers, intellectuals and youth—amongst all those who are appalled by the gross levels of social inequality Labour's pro-business policies have engendered. That is why we have every confidence that the future belongs to our party, the Socialist Equality Party, and to the Fourth International.

We alone can explain the reasons why the working class finds itself in its present terrible predicament and offer a viable programme on which the struggle for a better world can be taken forward. Our movement bases itself on the scientific world outlook of Marxism. It has been shaped over decades of political struggle against the domination of the working class by the Labour and Stalinist bureaucracies. We advance socialist and internationalist policies that reflect the reality of a modern world, in which the organisation of all aspects of economic life on a global scale demands the international unification of the working class for it to defend its independent political and social interests.

The readership of the *World Socialist Web Site* has grown by leaps and bounds. And it has done so under difficult conditions, in which there still exists a great deal of political confusion. The mass disaffection with Labour will not automatically resolve the problems we face in building a new workers' party. A great deal of political confusion and disorientation exists. Illusions remain in the viability of a reformist programme, and there are those such as the SA and the SLP who are doing everything in their power to perpetuate this situation. But we stand at a favourable historic juncture for our party, in which we must anticipate a growing interest in the socialist policies and political analysis advanced by the SEP.



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