

Labour's elder statesman Roy Hattersley calls on party to "rise up" against Prime Minister Blair

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Roy Hattersley, a former deputy leader of the Labour Party, has launched a scathing attack on the Blair government in a series of articles in the *Observer* and *Guardian* newspapers.

Hattersley implies that Prime Minister Tony Blair is an ignoramus, whose contempt for political history and principles makes it impossible for the government to "steer a steady course". This is not the first time that he has sharply criticised the Blair leadership. During the last four years, Hattersley has been one of the few dissenting voices in the party to complain at its ideological cleansing of any sense of history and principles, but never before in such strident terms. His Sunday June 24 article in the *Observer* stated that Labour Party members must now decide if "our loyalty is to a name or to an idea" and whether to "rise up against the coup d'état which overthrew the [party's] legitimate philosophy."

His remarks are all the more striking because, as a career politician for almost four decades, Hattersley was for much of this time associated with the Labour Party rightwing. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hattersley was a supporter of Hugh Gaitskill, the Labour leader who made the first failed attempt to remove the party's constitutional commitment to the nationalisation of basic industry. Some 20 years later in 1983, Hattersley formed the rightwing half of the so-called "dream ticket" for Labour leadership, as candidate for deputy leader along with the ostensible left winger Neil Kinnock as leader. Their victory marked the beginning of the party's campaign to ditch its programme of social reforms and embrace free-market policies.

Hattersley has not undergone some belated political conversion. His call for the membership to rise up is motivated by his long political experience, which has made him acutely sensitive to the implications of the party's lurch to the right. His fear is that in following this course Labour may be seriously in danger of losing its historic *raison d'être*.

For more than a century, the British ruling class maintained the status quo through a policy of class compromise and social reformism that found its embodiment in the programme of the Labour Party. Hattersley—who long ago repudiated any socialist goal for Labour, even in the dim and distant future—is concerned that the party must project a vision of "capitalism with a human face" if it is to continue to enjoy any political support in the working class.

Hattersley's articles appear just one month after the general

election, in which Blair won a second term in office, but was elected with the support of just 27 percent of the electorate. For the first time in history, more people abstained than voted for the winning party. In short, Labour's 167-seat parliamentary majority conceals its minority status in most the country.

His comments reflect the growing unease amongst sections of the establishment that the Blair government is oblivious, if not indifferent, to this fact and that by mistaking its parliamentary advantage for its actual political strength, it will press ahead with measures that will ultimately threaten its survival.

In an interview with the BBC's *Newsnight* programme during the general election, Blair was pressed on his attitude towards the growth of inequality under Labour. The prime minister refused to say that he believed this to be a bad thing; instead, he made clear his opposition to any redistributive measures, such as increased taxes on the super-rich. On many occasions the prime minister has said Labour's goal is the creation of a meritocracy, as opposed to greater social equality.

In his first *Observer* article Hattersley complained that meritocracy was incompatible with social democracy. Whilst the former "removes the barriers to progress which block the path of the clever and industrious... the notion of social mobility on which it is based is, to most of the children of the inner cities, a cruel joke. A Labour government should not be talking about escape routes from poverty and deprivation... The Labour Party was created to change society in such a way that there is no poverty and deprivation from which to escape. Meritocracy only offers shifting patterns of inequality."

Strategic considerations are way beyond the comprehension of the current Labour leadership, who gave Hattersley's remarks short shrift. Party Chairman Clive Solely dismissed his criticisms as "out of touch" and "over the top".

This brought a follow-up comment from Hattersley in the June 27 *Guardian*. Under the headline, "I don't know what's worse, Blair's apostasy or his naivety", Hattersley complained that "John Maynard Keynes explained that plain men, who pride themselves on rejecting airy-fairy theories, are usually unwitting adherents to ideas which were outdated and discredited before they were born." Blair had confirmed this with his embrace of free-market philosophy and disavowal of social justice, he continued.

Since the election, the government has unveiled measures to step

up the privatisation of health and education. Under plans in the Queen's Speech outlining the government's programme, private capital is to be used to build and manage public services, such as hospitals and schools. Such measures will inevitably lead to confrontation with the millions of low paid public sector workers, whose jobs and conditions are threatened by these changes, as well as the vast majority of the population who are wholly dependent on services provided by the state for their health and children's education. Yet the government is proceeding without any semblance of dialogue with those directly involved in providing such vital public services, in particular without ensuring the full support of the trade union bureaucracy, whose role will be vital in imposing these policies on their members.

Hattersley elaborated further on his concerns in another *Guardian* article July 2, entitled "Blair the bonehead". Of course it is necessary to "reorganise some working practices within the public services", and private capital should be encouraged into the public sector, he opined. But it should be recognised that there are ways and means of achieving these ends. The danger was that in proceeding in such an adversarial manner, the government had set itself on an unnecessary collision course with the trade unions and public sector workers, which "guarantees a winter breakdown".

The coded reference is to the 1978 "Winter of Discontent"—the mass movement that brought down the Callaghan Labour government in 1979. The "Social Contract" agreed between the Labour government and the Trade Union Congress had imposed wage restraints, in return for which workers were supposed to receive better public services and lower prices. But the unions proved unable to hold back an outpouring of anger, as it became clear to their members that no such trade-off was forthcoming, and that they were paying for the Social Contract three times over—in low wages, rising prices and strict controls on public spending. The result was industrial action that paralysed Britain, as a million and a half public sector workers went on strike, leading to the government's electoral defeat only months later.

Today's trade union leaders were willing to come to an "honourable accommodation" with the government, Hattersley assured Blair in his July 2 article, and TUC general secretary John Monks has generally been supportive of the government's proposals for the public services. But Labour's high-handed approach was leaving the union leaders little room for manoeuvre, as "justifiable and desirable ends were pursued with bone-headed public aggression", Hattersley continued. "The leaders of the public service unions cannot... force their members into reorganising their lives on the prime minister's instruction."

Widespread opposition to Labour's policies has forced sections of the union bureaucracy to talk tough in an attempt to assuage their members. Earlier this month, Unison, the public sector union, said it was reviewing its financial links with the Labour Party, because of Blair's privatisation proposals. For the same reason, the Fire Brigades Union had already agreed that its political fund would no longer automatically be used to benefit the Labour Party. On July 9, the GMB union announced it would cut £250,000 from its usual £650,000 annual contribution to the Labour Party, in order to finance a poster campaign condemning the use of private management in hospitals. Unison, the GMB and the Transport and

General Workers Union have said that they intend to "draw a line in the sand" regarding Labour's privatisation plans and are to begin a joint campaign in defence of public services.

By and large, such declarations are empty posturing. There is barely a jot of difference between the politics of Blair's Labour Party and that of the TUC. In all fundamentals the trade unions have fully supported the government in cutting welfare, holding down public spending and "reforming" health and education. The TUC's ire is only raised when government policy cuts across the interests of the union bureaucracy.

The same is true of Hattersley's attack. In his latest comment in the *Observer* July 8, Hattersley proposes the formation of an umbrella group—perhaps named the "Campaign for Real Labour"—to take up the fight against the Blairite "cuckoos" in "Labour's nest". However, this follows an account of his own wholehearted participation in the expulsion of the Militant tendency from the Labour Party in the 1980s due to its advocacy of left reformist policies and claims to be Trotskyist.

Hattersley describes this witch-hunt as "the revolt of the moderates". Such remarks serve to expose the political limitations of his opposition to Blair. In the final analysis, Blair's "New Labour" is only the end result of a process that Hattersley helped set in train. First, anyone retaining fidelity to Labour's old reformist policies was pushed out of the party or marginalised and cowed. Then, emboldened by their triumph over the left, the party leadership went on to push through a political agenda based upon an embrace of the type of free-market policies once associated with the Conservatives. By 1997, the party had got the leader it deserved—a man who openly denigrated his movement's past and eschewed its former reformist programme.

The feeble opposition of the TUC and those like Hattersley is only the final twitching of a corpse, and will not be enough to restore credibility in the Labour Party as a vehicle through which workers can articulate their social and political interests. Nevertheless, their concerns reflect in a partial and distorted fashion the deepening hostility felt by significant layers of the working class towards the Blair government, and are therefore an indication of more fundamental conflicts to come.



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