

# Blair's conference speech: Labour Party applauds its own gravedigger

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)  
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The seven-minute standing ovation accorded Prime Minister Tony Blair's last speech to the Labour Party conference shows two things: That sycophants and careerists will reconcile themselves to anything, and that Blair did indeed administer the coup de grace to what used to be the Labour Party.

There is not another audience throughout the length and breadth of Britain that would have sat through Blair's self-glorifying rationale for his government without protest.

Everything he had done, Blair declared, had to be done. In fact, Labour's transformation into an avowed party of big business should have taken place in the 1960s. When Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson had put forward his right-wing manifesto "In Place of Strife" and argued for a curb on industrial militancy, he was told "it was divisive, unnecessary, alienated core support."

Wilson backed down, and it was left to Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives to confront and defeat the organised working class: "In the 1980s some things done were necessary for the country. That's the truth," he said.

His paean to the smashing of the welfare state, brutal state attacks on the miners and other sections of workers, and the millions thrown into unemployment and poverty met with no opposition from Blair's audience. All agree this was the necessary price to be paid for transforming Britain into a cheap labour platform and a playground for the rich.

And when popular hatred of the Tories rendered them unelectable, it was Blair who stepped forward to complete Labour's break with the working class and to refashion it as an alternative party for the global financial oligarchy.

Blair told the conference, "We defied conventional political wisdom and so changed it," by which he meant the wholesale junking of Labour's reformist past. This paved the way for what he described as a "new political coalition," by which he meant an alliance between the upper-middle-class layers that flooded into New Labour and the super-rich.

"The core vote of this party today is not the heartlands, the inner city, not any sectional interest"—by which he meant the working class. It is "the country."

This is what earned New Labour three terms in office, Blair claimed. And there could be no retreat in the face of popular opposition because the endorsement of Rupert Murdoch and

other billionaires was dependent on a continued readiness to impose their dictates.

What did this mean, according to Blair? The danger was not that the party would retreat from its free-market policies. It was that the party would fail to understand that it was necessary to go much further.

Above all, no one should contemplate a break with the United States over Iraq or anything else.

"Yes it's hard sometimes to be America's strongest ally," Blair admitted. But "the truth is that nothing we strive for, from the world trade talks to global warming, to terrorism and Palestine can be solved without America, or [clearly as an afterthought] without Europe.... Distance this country and you may find it's a long way back."

There was barely a dry eye in the house. Delegates wept, and some even waved placards saying "Don't go." A handful sat in silence to register the most pathetic of protests.

On the evidence presented in the conference hall in Manchester, one could be forgiven for wondering just why it is that his party has spent the last months arguing bitterly over how soon Blair should go.

The political reality of Blair and Labour's deep unpopularity intruded only once—and only because he raised it.

Blair broke from the thrust of the speech to recount an anecdote about how his sons had been canvassing for Labour when a man shouted at them, "I hate that Tony Blair!" It was the "usual stuff" he said, to laughter.

Blair can recount such a story because he wears his indifference to public opinion as a badge of honour. For 12 years, so too did his party. As long as access to power and office guaranteed their social advancement, there was not a principle or policy Labour's functionaries would not sacrifice.

That is why they rose to their feet in solidarity with a leader who declared, "They say I hate the party, and its traditions. I don't. I love this party. There's only one tradition I hated: losing."

Yet, the loss of office is what is now staring Labour in the face, which is the only reason why those who have been his partners in crime want him to go. Their tears were a mixture of nostalgia for the golden years of an unassailable majority when they could do whatever they wanted, and trepidation over what

is to come.

Síon Simon MP, one of the 15 Blair loyalists who earlier co-authored a letter calling on him to stand down, gushed, “It was a great speech. He is the greatest prime minister we have ever had.”

Only this absence of any genuine opposition within Labour’s ranks could allow Blair to deliver what Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper described as the “best of his life” by a man who remained his party’s “greatest asset”: “Tearful delegates were left in no doubt about their monstrous act of ingratitude,” it complained.

Before conference began, there was speculation over how rough a ride Blair would be given, how big the demand for a leadership contest would be, whether events would hasten his departure from office and if this would result in shifts in Labour policy. But what opposition there was had fizzled out long before Blair took to the stage.

Two events deserve to be recalled.

The first was the belly-crawling performance by Chancellor Gordon Brown, who has been touted for years as Blair’s natural heir. He used the speech on Monday, billed as his declaration of intent, to apologise to Blair for any disagreements they had had and to state that it had been a privilege to work with him.

Even Blair’s wife Cherie emerged with greater credit when she was allegedly heard by a reporter calling Brown a liar.

Secondly, there was the telling response of delegates to the debate on foreign policy—the very issue that has galvanised popular hostility to Blair. The conference hall was barely half full and just one delegate attacked the war against Iraq.

There is only one direction in which the Labour Party will move in response to its crisis, and that was mapped out by Blair. His “advice” on how to respond to the challenge from the Conservative Party was to attack it from the right.

He derided Tory party leader David Cameron for pandering “to anti-Americanism by stepping back from America.... Sacrificing British influence for party expediency is not a policy worthy of a prime minister”; for being soft on illegal immigration and crime; for opposing identity cards and proposing a bill of rights.

What is also certain is that there will be no letup in the factional war within the party. Blair once again singly failed to endorse Brown as his successor. His attitude to his rival is one of contempt—and this is shared by his allies and by sections of the bourgeoisie.

Brown was famously proclaimed to be “psychologically flawed” by one Blairite. His chief failing for these layers is that, whereas he has no disagreements with Blair, he lacks the killer instinct. Just as he ceded leadership of the party to Blair, they ask, would he not also waver in the face of opposition if he were prime minister?

There are clear indications that a pro-Blair leadership ticket is being prepared against Brown, with figures such as Education

Secretary Alan Johnson and Home Secretary John Reid taking poll position.

The problem facing Labour is that Blair was all too successful in his refashioning of the party. Truly, Labour no longer has any constituency in its traditional heartlands and the inner cities. However, this means it cannot have a significant constituency in the “country.”

Labour and the Tories are contending for the backing of big business and a narrow layer of the petty bourgeoisie. Both advocate policies that are antithetical to the interests of the mass of the population, with Labour on many issues the most right-wing of two parties.

This is a historically unprecedented situation and faces British capitalism with a crisis of rule.

New Labour is a product of incredible political shortsightedness. Whether in office or in opposition, the Labour Party had fulfilled a political function crucial to the stability of British imperialism. It offered an alternative to the Tories and held out to working people the prospect of securing, at least in part, their social interests. It was the political wing of a multimillion-member trade union movement that promised to curb the worst excesses of capitalism and thereby guarantee decent, well-paid jobs, free education and healthcare and a living pension on retirement.

Today, the party and the unions that gave birth to it have presided over the destruction of everything with which they were once associated. Millions have deserted Labour because they recognise that the party no longer speaks for them. At present, this has taken the form of record abstentions in elections and a generalised hatred of the entire political setup. Things cannot and will not end there.

Those assembled in Manchester are hoping that a new leader and some political repackaging will rescue what they refer to as the “New Labour project.” They are destined to be disappointed.

Continuing with the historical fiction of describing a right-wing party as “Labour” no longer fools anyone. Blair may like to think of himself as having heralded a new era. More truthfully, his leadership marked the definitive end of one based upon the advocacy of social reforms and other measures to ameliorate the class struggle.

The social impulses that gave rise to the formation of the Labour Party must find alternative expression in the building of a genuine socialist party. The working class needs such an organisation if it is to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and to oppose the imperialist brutality being inflicted on the peoples of the world.



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