

British Labour: A party of war and social reaction

Chris Marsden
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The following speech by Chris Marsden, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain, was delivered to an election campaign meeting of the German SEP on September 16 in Berlin.

In order to better understand what is taking place in Germany, it is useful to look at Britain.

By this, I do not simply mean a comparison between the government of Angela Merkel and that of Conservative Premier Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s, though there are certainly lessons to be learned about the full impact on the social conditions of working people that will result from the pro-market, neo-liberal offensive being mounted against Germany's welfare state and labour protection legislation.

British political life has another pioneering element. It is the country where the political degeneration of social democracy has arguably achieved its most finished expression.

Everyone here will be aware that the Labour government is in the midst of a bitter factional struggle, prompted by the realisation that the longer Tony Blair remains as prime minister, the smaller the chances of the Labour Party being re-elected. But what is unfolding is more than a conjunctural crisis that can be resolved by replacing Blair with Chancellor Gordon Brown. We are witnessing the ongoing disintegration not merely of Blair and Blairism, but of the Labour Party itself.

In the mid-1990s, Blair was chosen to head a political project to transform Labour into a right-wing party of big business. To do so, he did not need to start from scratch. Make no mistake, social reformism had already been buried well before Blair came to a position of leadership.

The days when Labour had advocated serious reforms in the interests of working people are long gone. The party's last reformist hurrah was in the early 1970s and ended with the Callaghan government's imposition of austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. This provoked a mass strike movement against Labour and ended with the coming to power of Thatcher in 1979.

For 18 years, the Conservatives were able to carry out their monetarist economic programme chiefly because Labour and the trade unions sabotaged any and all struggles against Thatcher, while they themselves lurched ever further to the right. This political shift was an international phenomenon that found its most significant expression in the liquidation of the Soviet Union, which in turn became the occasion for the proclamation of the "death of socialism" that found enthusiastic support in Labour's leadership.

Blair came to prominence not because of his political convictions, but because of his lack of them. He was a cipher, ready to adapt himself fully to the new political realities as laid down by big business. His task was not merely to formalise Labour's abandonment of reformism by ditching Clause Four of its constitution. He was charged with refashioning the party as an alternative political vehicle for the major corporations that could no longer rely on the survival of the Conservative government.

The Tories had enjoyed the advantage of having no ideological opponents on the supposed left of official politics arguing against their

glorification of the "free market" in the post-Soviet world. Nevertheless, after 18 years, the millions of workers who had borne the brunt of their brutal social experiment wanted rid of them.

Blair declared that he would make Labour "electable," by which he meant acceptable to the financial oligarchy that had emerged to global pre-eminence in the 1980s, while still capable of securing a mandate to govern.

That was the significance of Blair's launch of "New Labour" and his promotion of a "Third Way"—combining essentially Thatcherite economic policies with measures that he claimed would protect the most vulnerable and maintain social cohesion.

Given the wave of anti-Tory sentiment, this was enough for Blair to win office—with the enthusiastic backing of Rupert Murdoch and numerous other big business figures.

In the end, however, New Labour has not signalled Labour's rebirth, but its swansong.

Blair was able to take full advantage of the ideological confusion created during decades of misleadership by Stalinism and social democracy and to capitalise on the enmity felt towards the Tories. But this could not last for long. Even the best propaganda machine, backed by a pliant media, cannot fool all of the people all of the time. Eventually the truth—revealed by bitter personal experience—will out.

The virtual collapse of the Blair government is first of all confirmation that it is not possible to maintain popular support for policies that are aimed at the enrichment of an elite by the systematic impoverishment of the majority. The economic and social agenda of the oligarchy—whether packaged as Thatcherism or New Labour—is profoundly undemocratic and can ultimately be imposed only by force.

Neither Labour nor any other bourgeois party aspiring to government can deviate from this economic and social agenda, dictated as it is by the dominant sections of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, Blair's critics within the party that have coalesced around Brown have made clear that they are "irreconcilable modernisers" who want only to rescue the "New Labour" project by distancing themselves from its most hated representative.

A new course can be charted only by a party dedicated to the establishment of an entirely different social order to that based on private ownership of the means of production by a super-rich elite.

This must be understood as the essential background to the crisis that has engulfed the Blair government, one that is rooted in the collapse in its social base of support. However, it is a crisis that has been brought to a head and that is centred on the mass opposition generated by Blair's participation in the war against Iraq and the terrible consequences of his alliance with the Bush administration.

In this too, Blair was determined to advance the interests of the financial oligarchy that dictates the US drive to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich regions of the world.

There is an extraordinary aspect to the factional warfare that has

engulfed the Labour government. Blair's opponents are desperate to save the party from electoral meltdown and are prepared to cut his political throat in order to do so. Despite this, they can barely speak about the main reason for Blair having become the most widely hated politician in British history.

Blair has been living on borrowed time ever since he took Britain into the Iraq war on the basis of lies and in defiance of mass anti-war sentiment. Just as with Aznar in Spain and Berlusconi in Italy, he has never recovered from this.

He hoped that victory—and a share of the spoils of war—would silence his opponents. Instead, British imperialism has been sucked into a bloody quagmire, and not just with regards to the resistance to the occupation and the descent into civil war in Iraq. The situation in Afghanistan is just as bad, and the entire Middle East has been radicalised against the US and Britain. The straw that finally broke Blair's political back was Israel's criminal and ultimately disastrous attack on Lebanon, which saw his toadying to Bush plumb new depths.

Let me cite just one verdict on Blair—that of former US President Jimmy Carter.

He told the *Daily Telegraph* at the end of last month, "I have been surprised and extremely disappointed by Tony Blair's behaviour.... In many countries where I meet with leaders and private citizens there is an equating of American policy with Great Britain—with Great Britain obviously playing the lesser role.

"We now have a situation where America is so unpopular overseas that even in countries like Egypt and Jordan our approval ratings are less than five percent. It's a shameful and pitiful state of affairs and I hold your British Prime Minister to be substantially responsible for being so compliant and subservient."

Yet, despite mass opposition and even a growing demand for a change in foreign policy from within the bourgeoisie, not a word has been issued by Brown that would indicate a distancing of Labour from the unpopular and crisis-ridden Bush administration.

Anatole Kaletsky, associate editor of the *Times*, was moved to ask: "Has Gordon spotted the elephant in the room? If not, he's in big trouble."

Iraq "has destroyed Tony Blair's popularity and overshadowed the many successes of his Government," he continued. "To be more precise, the 'elephant' has not been the war itself, but the prime minister's abandonment of Britain's national interests in his blind obedience to President Bush. Yet the strangest feature of the Labour Party's catharsis last week is that it wasn't cathartic at all. In all the agonies of last week, nobody mentioned the trauma that was the root cause—that almost all Labour activists and most voters have come to detest and distrust Mr. Blair because of his support for US foreign policy, not only in Iraq, but also in Lebanon, Israel and Iran."

The debate in the Labour Party, he concluded, should be "about foreign policy, the US and Iraq. If Gordon Brown sticks to Mr. Blair's foreign policies, he will lose the next election."

There is nothing progressive in such belated criticisms of Blair. They come from bourgeois elements that have been forced to recognise that the policies they fully supported have suffered a shipwreck. Kaletsky complains that "Mr. Rumsfeld and Mr. Cheney have reduced America from a military superpower to a paper tiger," and calls for "a new foreign policy that is not anti-American, nor even anti-Bush, but one that is clearly opposed to President Bush's blunders."

It is a measure of the extent to which Labour as a whole, and not just Blair, has become wedded to the US neo-conservatives that Conservative Party leader David Cameron has made more critical statements on British and US foreign policy than any serious challenger to Blair within his party.

Outlining to the British American Project what he called, "A new approach to foreign affairs: liberal Conservatism," Cameron took his

distance from Bush and the neo-cons, but not from America.

Neo-conservatism had attempted to fight the terrorist threat based on "a conviction that pre-emptive military action" was appropriate and necessary and that "freedom and democracy" promoted "through regime change is the best guarantee of our security."

This had "an unintended and worrying consequence. It has fanned the flames of anti-Americanism, both here in Britain and around the world."

To safeguard both US and British interests, the "special relationship" must be maintained, but "we will serve neither our own, nor America's, nor the world's interests if we are seen as America's unconditional associate in every endeavour.... We should be solid but not slavish in our friendship with America."

Cameron called for "a new emphasis on multilateralism" based on "international institutions and international alliances" and made specific criticism of abuses of democratic rights at Guantanamo Bay, "excessive periods of detention without trial" in Britain and "disproportionate Israeli bombing in Lebanon."

The *Guardian*—a staunchly pro-Labour paper—commented on Cameron's remarks: "It is another sign of the leadership paralysis now afflicting the Labour Party that Gordon Brown, even if he wanted to, could not have made the kind of sensible, plain-speaking, forward-looking speech on foreign policy that the Conservative leader David Cameron made yesterday."

Just because Labour is so disgustingly right-wing, working people have no reason to echo such praise for Cameron.

What do his remarks signify?

Sections of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe are looking on at the catastrophe that has been created in the Middle East with a measure of genuine concern at its implications. However, their primary and overriding aim is to exploit the resulting weakening of the Bush administration in order to press forward their own imperialist interests.

None of the European powers will contemplate coming into open conflict with Washington, but they calculate that US efforts to monopolise oil and other vital global resources and markets has suffered a setback. Their response will be a combination of independent political and military action and hard bargaining with Washington to secure their own share of a colonial-style redivision of the world.

The response of the British bourgeoisie will be of a similar character. That is why Cameron combined his calls for a more quid-pro-quo relationship with Washington with an insistence that Britain could achieve nothing in world politics without America, and a declaration of support for the use of military force, including pre-emptive war.

The emergence of such tensions between Europe and America will do nothing to lessen the danger of war. Quite the opposite: it will spur on the development of European militarism and necessitate ever more severe attacks on social and democratic rights. As with the task of reversing the growth of social inequality—which on a world scale is claiming the lives of millions—everything depends on the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The collapse in support for the Labour Party in Britain creates the most favourable conditions for such a fundamental political reorientation of the working class—just as does the legitimate hostility of Berlin's workers and young people towards the "Red-Red" coalition.

That is the significance of the campaign that has been waged by our comrades in Germany. It is aimed at the unification of the workers of Europe, the United States and the world through the building of their own party, the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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