Britain: New Labour's right-wing course to continue under Brown

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Gordon Brown took over as leader of the Labour Party on Sunday at a special conference in Manchester, England. The chancellor of the exchequer will officially become Tony Blair's successor as prime minister on Wednesday. The same conference also saw Harriet Harman elected as Labour's deputy leader.

The leadership contest was in fact no contest at all. Brown faced no challenger, after no one was able to muster enough support to stand against him.

This could only occur in an organisation that is politically dead. After all, Blair was standing down under conditions where support for the government is at an all-time low, having recently resulted in record losses in elections in Scotland and Wales. Labour is reviled for taking Britain to war against Iraq, pursuing policies of privatisation and deregulation, and carrying out an even greater redistribution of wealth away from working people to the rich than under the Conservative government.

Even from the standpoint of the narrowest electoral considerations, many commentators considered it essential to place some distance between the party and its outgoing leader. However, Labour proved unable to accomplish even this.

Aside from the internal cliques within the Labour Party, few see any difference between Brown and Blair. They are the joint architects of the New Labour project. Indeed Brown is known to be a more ideologically convinced Atlanticist and prides himself on his unwavering commitment to the free-market nostrums that are at the heart of Labour's transformation into the political instrument of the major corporations.

Irrespective of his pledge to "unite the forces of compassion," Brown's selection will mean worse to come under a Labour government. Just before his speech, the last reported row between Blair and Brown was over the European Union treaty then under discussion in Brussels. Brown's supporters let it be known that the chancellor had strongly objected to Blair's agreement to a French demand to drop a reference to "free and undistorted competition" as an explicit objective in the new EU treaty—a clear signal to the City of London and Rupert Murdoch of where Brown's own sense of compassion is directed.

Sections of the media concentrated on Brown's repeated promise for "change" and a commitment to reconnect with the concerns of the electorate. But on all essentials Brown's inaugural speech as party leader on Sunday was a statement of orthodoxy and continuity, in which he emphasised that his government would be based on the values of "duty, honesty, hard work, family and respect for others".

There would be no "retreating to the failed policies of the past", he insisted. "That is not the New Labour way." His government would press forward with privatisation, linking every secondary school to a business and establishing a constitution for the National Health Service that would enable the government to codify its "essential reforms."

The same was true on foreign policy. Having acknowledged that the Iraq war had been a "divisive issue" in the party, he emphasised the need for shared "British values" and defended the interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East. His government would "meet our obligations" and "be unyielding in support for our dedicated armed forces."

The only contest that actually took place within the party was for the post of deputy leader, but this too was a desultory affair. Only half of Labour's dwindling 180,000 membership actually voted, and just eight percent of the members of Labour's affiliated unions and organisations.

Harman was the most popular choice amongst party members, and there is now a desperate effort to portray her selection as a softening of the party's right-wing

course, an impression that she was also keen to give. During her campaign she said that she regretted not voting against the Iraq war and that she supported a "review" of Labour's policy on Britain's nuclear weapons and tuition fees—policies she also voted to support.

This may have been a consideration in why some members voted for her, given that she has identified issues on which the party is haemorrhaging electoral support. But her victory has more to do with the fact that she is a woman from the south of England, under conditions where the Conservatives are expected to make political capital over Brown's Scottish background. She is, moreover, considered to be a loyal "Brownite" and had the backing of some of the chancellor's key supporters, including Douglas Alexander and Alistair Darling.

Any claim to left credentials on the part of Harman is undermined by her actions as Labour's first welfare secretary in 1997. She was removed from the cabinet after a backlash against her piloting of New Labour's attack on benefits for lone parents.

Her main challenger in the final round was Education Secretary Alan Johnson, who is more closely identified with Blair. Even so, her victory was by the narrowest of margins: 50.43 percent to 49.56 percent.

To the extent that there was any more concerted effort to make a left feint, this was associated with the candidacy of Jon Cruddas.

Cruddas had insisted that Labour's biggest problem was that it had lost its core working class supporters and had to reconnect with them. But he did not receive significant backing amongst party members or MPs, drawing most of his support from affiliated unions. He was eliminated in the penultimate round of voting and called for his supporters to vote for Harman.

His allies have proclaimed him as "kingmaker" for Harman and predicted that Brown would be forced to offer him a job in government. However, in reality his support divided almost equally between Harman and Johnson.

Nevertheless, the *Guardian* has proclaimed him as the "unofficial leader of the left." This too is an extraordinary development that testifies to how right-wing the Labour Party has become. Labour's official left—the Campaign Group—could not muster enough support to stand a candidate against Brown and has now been eclipsed by a man whose political career began as Blair's deputy political secretary and an adviser on the party's relations with the trade unions.

Besides his relations with the trade union bureaucracy,

Cruddas is also most closely associated with the Compass pressure group. This organisation was established by some of those instrumental in the political formation of New Labour and in building up its support from big business. Its leader, Neal Lawson, is a former adviser to Brown and a business lobbyist—one of many New Labour apparatchiks who have tried to represent its right-wing policies in a more concealed fashion but who also insist that there can be no return to social reformism.

Thus we have the spectacle of a party whose response to the deep unpopularity of everything associated with New Labour and "Blairism" is to opt for more of the same.

The pro-Labour press did its best to present a new leadership under Brown and Harman as, in the words of the *Independent*, "drawing a line under the Blair era."

The *Daily Mirror* said that Labour's new leader was "on fire," had "a moral purpose" and signalled "a new era in British politics." The *Guardian* was equally effusive, describing a new "dawn" for Labour and Brown as a "new captain" of a "new government" that will "set sail on Wednesday afternoon."

The constant invoking of change and newness is a transparent attempt at political deception that will not succeed. The *Guardian*'s own sketch writer, Simon Hoggart, more honestly described Brown as "Blair Mark II" and Sunday's conference as a "classic New Labour event."

Recent research shows that only one in ten workers believe Labour represents their interests. No attempt to hail the election of a new captain for Labour's sinking ship can change this historic political realignment, which is rooted in an unprecedented polarisation between the financial oligarchy on whose behalf Labour governs and the vast majority of working people.