

Guardian journalist on Obama's election: An "armed insurrection" averted

Chris Marsden
10 November 2008

One of the most extraordinary statements made on Barack Obama's victory in the Presidential elections was by Martin Kettle in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper.

Kettle is someone with intimate connections to the New Labour project since its inception. He is the son of two prominent supporters of the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain, his father being the literary critic and philosopher Arthur Kettle who sat on the editorial board of *Marxism Today*. Kettle junior also wrote for the journal which, in the 1980s, did much to develop the ideas that came to be associated with New Labour including its explicit repudiation of the class struggle in the supposedly "post-Fordist" era of "modernity".

He is a personal friend of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who wrote in 2004, "socialism has failed. Even the era of the labour movement is passing inexorably away.... Capitalism has won the economic battle, albeit in a form that no 19th-century capitalist would easily recognise. Socialism has become a religion not a programme."

Kettle usually functions as a propagandist for those such as Blair and his successor Gordon Brown whose aim is to convince the disaffected that there is no alternative on the left to their rightwing trajectory. Yet, like so many in what passes for Britain's nominally liberal—often ex-Stalinist and pro-New Labour—intellectual circles, he is less convinced of the end of the class struggle and the "death of socialism" than his public pronouncements would normally indicate. Hence his candour in detailing how he saw the significance of Obama's election in his November 5 article, "The challenge ahead".

Acknowledging that Obama's was "an immense and historic victory", Kettle went on to explain that "if he had not won the 2008 presidential election and had not

won it in some style, it would have been the most shocking political event in modern American political history."

The election had been "the Democrats' to lose," he continued. "For Obama to have lost the election when the incumbent party had presided over an economic collapse of epochal immensity and over two unsuccessful and unpopular wars, with three quarters of Americans believing their country was heading in the wrong direction and against an opponent who had been nominated by a divided party and who then himself selected a manifestly unqualified and divisive running-mate would have constituted the biggest electoral missed opportunity in generations."

Had this occurred, Kettle then warns, "It might have persuaded an entire generation that there was absolutely no validity whatever in electoral politics. Millions might have concluded that the only way to get the Republicans out of the White House was by some form of armed insurrection."

Later he adds, "if Obama had not won well, that too would have been a shattering blow to the Democratic cause at such a time."

There is a degree of hyperbole in Kettle invoking the danger of armed insurrection. Nevertheless there is a serious content to the warning he directs towards the political elite. He made his remarks in the knowledge that, ever since George W. Bush came to power in 2000 thanks to electoral fraud and the disenfranchisement of many voters, confidence in the US electoral system has been at rock bottom. Under conditions of acute social tensions made worse by the onset of recession, the situation in the US is indeed explosive.

Prior to the election, the *Guardian's* Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, reported how, amidst claims of a surge in support for Republican candidate John

McCain, "police forces in major cities made extra security preparations for election day."

In Chicago, "All police leave has been cancelled and off-duty firefighters have been told to keep their kit ready at home. The unspoken concern among some is that a surprise Obama loss—especially with most polls predicting a win for the Democrat—could lead to civil unrest.

"Detroit and Los Angeles were also deploying extra police out of concern for the potentially heightened emotions raised by this election."

Kettle is right in warning that a defeat for Obama could have led to an explosion of pent-up social anger—not only amongst African Americans, but millions of young people, Hispanics and many others who want an end to the Bush years and who believe Obama when he promises "change". He is also correct that it would have created the conditions for a major political realignment by finally discrediting the Democratic Party as a vehicle for even partially realizing the social interests of the American working class.

He also understands that such a disastrous development for big business and its political representatives and media apologists has only been deferred not eliminated. That is why Kettle spends the second half of his comment warning that expectations amongst working people and youth that Obama will deliver policies framed in their interests must be opposed.

Obama has won "his presidency by crafting a majoritarian programme on the economy, health, energy and the war," Kettle stresses, i.e., by also appealing to big business and former Republicans in "the mountain and desert states of the west and in parts of the south."

"So, while Obama has a mandate that has been denied to every Democratic president since the days of Martin Luther King," he warns, "he also has a level of support that he must be careful not to test to destruction. Forty-eight per cent of Americans did not feel the hand of history on their shoulders on Tuesday, in spite of everything."

Kettle is urging that Obama must do only what is considered acceptable by corporate America. And to this end he insists that the "majoritarian" coalition is not tested "to destruction". Such rhetoric is similar in

all respects to the language he used for years to justify support for Blair. "The only practical and principled course is to back him, though without illusions, as the Marxists used to say," he once famously wrote in the aftermath of the Iraq war, while calling for "the doctrine and weapons of interventionism" to be "protected, honed and made effective."

Unfortunately for Kettle and his ilk, calls for Obama to defy the expectations of his supporters will only guarantee that he will alienate them more fully—and with yet more dramatic consequences—than New Labour did in the years following its victory over the Conservatives in 1997.



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