Britain: Official parties pledge austerity, cuts, militarism and war

Julie Hyland
17 April 2010

Britain's main parties—Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats—have released their manifestos for the May 6 General Election. Each made clear that the purpose of the election is to provide a democratic fig-leaf for a major assault on living standards, while maintaining the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan.

On the economy, all three parties are committed to massive cuts in public spending in an effort to recoup the billions handed over to the banks and major financial institutions following the 2008 global financial crash. As the manifestos indicate, this is only the first stage in a fundamental restructuring of economic and social relations in Britain.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown launched Labour's "A fair future for all." While making no accounting for the global economic crisis, much less its own role in facilitating it, the manifesto makes only passing reference to the need for greater banking regulation, and then only when agreed internationally.

Labour has said it will halve Britain's £160 billion budget deficit within four years through spending cuts and higher taxes, but claims this will be achieved while ensuring "maximum protection to frontline services". In reality, its manifesto sets out a major extension of its privatisation of the public sector, coupled with a clamp down on pay.

In March the government announced a one percent cap on public sector pay increases and a freeze for the top-earners. This is just a prelude to pay cuts, all to be implemented under the guise of "fairness".

Stressing the continuity of its plans with the right-wing, pro-business policies it has implemented over the past 13 years, Lord Mandelson, Labour's campaign chief, described the manifesto as "Blair-plus".

It was "the next logical step from what Tony Blair oversaw. If anything, it's bolder and harder because we're tailoring services to the individual and taking on parts of the public services that may have been failing," he said.

"Personalising public services" is a euphemism for handing over swathes of social provision to the private sector. Hospitals, schools and—notionally at least—police forces deemed to be "underperforming" or "failing" are to be further opened up for take-over by business or charitable organisations. Labour states that all hospitals are to become "Foundation Trusts", a mechanism for establishing joint ventures with the private sector.

Brown reiterated this pledge at one such existing Foundation Trust—the Queen Elizabeth in Birmingham. Built at the cost of £627 million under the Private Finance Initiative, the total cost to taxpayers at the end of the 35-year pay-back period will be £2.58 billion.

In addition to ensuring an "active role for the independent sector", the manifesto pledges £20 billion "efficiency" savings in health alone.

In education, Labour proposes annexing "unsatisfactory" schools to be run by a "federation", including education providers such the Harris chain of academies, run by Lord Harris, chairman of CarpetRight floor-coverings. "Mutual federations" are also to be encouraged to run children's centres.

Under the slogan of "personalised welfare", the manifesto stresses that "responsibility [is] the cornerstone of our welfare state". This is followed by a pledge to crackdown on welfare benefits.

There is to be a significant extension of prison places, along with Social Impact Bonds—again involving the private sector, this time in so-called "rehabilitation" programmes—and proposals to deduct the cost of incarceration, through taxation, from those imprisoned.

Much has been made of the supposed differences between Labour and Tory pledges—"big government" as against "people power." But in essentials they are the same.

The Conservative manifesto, "We're all in this together" pledges an emergency budget within 50 days of taking office to address the public deficit, and for the Bank of England to take over "prudential supervision" of the finance sector. Once again, the buzzwords of "social responsibility" and pledges to "redistribute power … to individuals, families and local communities", are a disguise for the wholesale privatisation of public provision.

Calling for a "cultural change", it argues that education, health and other services should be "freed" from state control and handed over to community organisations, and the private sector. In addition to a public sector pay freeze, Academy status is to be extended to primary schools and prisons are to be

© World Socialist Web Site

subject to payment by results!

"Co-ops" are to be encouraged to run provisions such as nursing, and an army of "volunteers" created to help in "rebuilding neighbourhoods." There will be a National Citizen Service for 16-year-olds and a "Work Programme" for all unemployed, backed by a withdrawal of benefits.

The manifesto rejects "rules and regulations" on matters relating to protecting the environment, preferring to go with the "grain of human nature" and "new incentives and market signals".

The Liberal Democrats have set out their stall as being more honest about the scale of the cuts that are necessary. The party chose to unveil its manifesto at the headquarters of the Bloomberg financial information service in the City of London. Economics spokesman Vincent Cable complained that Labour and the Conservatives were not addressing the seriousness of the deficit in their manifestos. This was the "the elephant in the room", he said.

With a structural deficit worth approximately £70 billion, he continued, halving it would mean cuts of £35 billion. Labour had only identified £20 billion and the Liberal Democrats have found a further £10 billion. Even so, more was needed.

The Liberal Democrats try to reconcile this with a policy of "fairness". Pledges to crack down on tax avoidance and raise the threshold at which people begin paying tax are presented as progressive "redistributive" measures. In reality, its tax plans favour those in the higher income brackets while loss in revenue to the Treasury is to be filled, in part, by a pay-cap in the public sector.

Future plans to restore the link between the state pension and earnings or price increases are tied to an increase in the state pension age. And the party proposes an "independent review" on reforming public sector pensions "to ensure that they are sustainable", as well as a "wholesale review of value for money in the public sector".

Individual schools are to be given greater control of their own budgets and "freed" from local authorities. Labour's contentious Academy schools are to be replaced with "Sponsor-managed Schools" that will allow "other appropriate providers… to be involved in delivering state-funded education."

In health, the Liberal Democrats also propose greater involvement for private providers and the further marketisation of the NHS, with plans for "front-line staff" to be placed in charge of wards or department budgets.

The fundamentally anti-democratic character of the commitments outlined by the three parties is just as starkly revealed in their support for the continued occupation of Afghanistan, which is opposed by the broad mass of the population.

Notwithstanding numerous inquiries and revelations of British involvement in war crimes, Labour's manifesto stresses there will be no retreat from the illegal doctrine of "pre-emptive war" cynically re-named a "responsibility to protect".

The manifesto starts by noting that the General Election takes place under conditions in which British troops are fighting to "to defend the safety of the British people and the security of the world in Afghanistan."

Pledging "stronger international action against terrorism", it explicitly targets Iran as "the gravest nuclear threat to global security" since the 1960s.

Another feature of the drive to militarise British society is the sinister one-line pledge that "cadet forces will move increasingly into state schools."

The Conservative manifesto does not mention Iraq, the invasion and occupation of which it wholeheartedly supported. But it insists that in Afghanistan "success is vital" and upholds the strategy of "humanitarian intervention".

This is part of what it described as an "active foreign policy" for Britain, and a pledge to "support our brave armed forces". In addition, it proposes the establishment of a National Security Council—chaired by the prime minister. It notes that "some of the biggest threats to our security do not come from abroad—they are home grown." On this basis, the manifesto pledges to ban any organisations which "advocate hate or the violent overthrow of our society".

The Liberal Democrats' opposition to the "like-for-like" replacement of Britain's £100 billion Trident nuclear weapons system and a proposal for a judicial inquiry into British complicity in torture and extraordinary rendition does not detract from their support for British imperialism.

The party's initial criticisms of the war against Iraq—made from the standpoint of upholding the authority of the United Nations—are largely absent. To the extent that Iraq is mentioned, it is because it "highlight[s] the dangers of a subservient relationship with the United States that neglects Britain's core values and interests," the manifesto states.

Concern with the character of Britain's international alliances does not prevent the Liberal Democrats from defending the occupation of Afghanistan. Alongside a photograph of party leader Nick Clegg meeting with troops overseas, the Liberal Democrats pledge to be "critical supporters of the Afghanistan mission".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site