

UK Labour assumes “one nation” Tory mantle

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Every annual Labour Party conference is a stage-managed event, presided over by an upper-middle class layer showcasing right-wing policies on behalf of its corporate sponsors. Hence the efforts by those involved and the media to portray this week’s gathering as something different.

Great play was made of the fact that Labour leader Ed Miliband dispensed with notes to make his keynote speech—one that stressed his personal “story” as the son of Jewish immigrants fleeing the Nazis, his birth in a National Health Service (NHS) hospital and education at a London comprehensive school.

Miliband’s “ordinariness” was intended to contrast favourably with the background of multimillionaire Etonian prime minister David Cameron and much of his cabinet.

But this was no declaration of class war. Instead, the Labour leader evoked the mantle of “one nation” Toryism first proclaimed by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in 1872 to argue that it was he, not Cameron, who stood in the real traditions of Conservatism.

Disraeli’s “one nation” was a “vision of Britain”, Miliband said, “where patriotism, loyalty, dedication to the common cause courses through the veins of all and nobody feels left out.”

The Labour Party had adopted a similar vision, he went on, “as Clement Attlee’s Labour government rebuilt Britain after the [Second World] war”.

Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls had made the same point in his speech earlier. Many had said that August’s Olympic Games had been “Britain’s greatest summer”, he said. But he reminded them of “an even greater summer still: the summer of 1945, the end of six hard years of war, when our nation welcomed its heroes home from the battlefields of Europe, Asia and the Atlantic, and celebrated together the defeat of fascism.”

The Labour government elected that year, “faced even

greater challenges than we face today: an economy enfeebled by war; a national debt double the size of ours today. And they made tough and unpopular decisions: to continue with rationing, to cut defence spending, and to introduce prescription charges.”

They had “focussed on the long-term task ahead”, putting in place “long-term reforms, enduring achievements, vital to our country’s future,” he said, citing the NHS, a major social housing project and the raising of the school-leaving age.

“They were different times. But it is our task to recapture the spirit and values and national purpose of that time,” Balls said.

Disraeli and Attlee were bourgeois politicians, determined to defend British capitalism. Even so, Miliband and Labour have no claim to stand in their footsteps.

Disraeli proclaimed his “one nation” Toryism as the development of capitalism was producing a huge growth in social inequality, and revolutionary ferment in the working class.

In 1871, the first revolutionary uprising of this class had taken place in the Paris Commune. Referencing this event, which had struck terror into the bourgeoisie across Europe, Disraeli stressed that a similar revolution had been avoided in Britain, and could only be avoided in the future if the state took measures to provide support for the poor.

His noblesse oblige was oriented to the newly enfranchised male working class. It was necessary to be “alive to the sentiment of the nation,” for if the institutions of government were considered to be not “an institution for the welfare of the nation” but rather “an obstacle to the wise progress of the race, they will begin to think we might as well get rid of this institution!”

Similar concerns of social revolution motivated the post-war Attlee government. By this time, little was left of

Disraeli's claim that workers could be given a place in the bourgeois order. Capitalism had produced nothing but the horrors of depression, fascism and world war.

Revolution stalked Europe and found its expression in the massive landslide win for Attlee's Labour Party, which had promised to build a "land fit for heroes". The rescuing of British capital at this point required the most extensive social reforms ever undertaken by the bourgeoisie.

Today, capitalism is in a systemic crisis. In Europe, virtually every week sees hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, protesting austerity and clashes on the streets. It is little over one year since major inner-city disturbances swept London and other cities, yet the interim has seen youth unemployment worsen and poverty rise.

In the face of this, what does Labour propose?

Balls's reference to Attlee's "tough decisions" was not accidental. The only "reforms" on offer at this conference was the pledge to utilise some of the expected £4 billion windfall from the sale of the 4G mobile phone spectrum to build "affordable" homes, and equally vague commitments on vocational training.

While defending the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's public sector pay freeze, Labour would not commit to any regulations on the banks.

Instead, Balls outlined that, in the run-up to the 2015 general election, Labour would set out "tough fiscal rules" that would cover every area of government spending.

"We must be upfront with the British people that, under Labour, there would have been cuts and that—on spending, pay and pensions—there will be difficult decisions in the future from which we will not flinch", he said.

At the same conference, Liam Byrne, the shadow work and pensions secretary, pledged more cuts in welfare under Labour.

Labour's complaint against the coalition is not its austerity measures, which it supports, but that these have failed to revive the economy. Balls said that the UK is "just one of only two G20 countries in recession—the longest double-dip recession since the Second World War." The national deficit has risen by 22 percent alone this year. "While Britain has been stalled over the past two years, other countries have been forging ahead", he said, citing Germany, the United States and China.

Labour has nothing to offer, however, except more of the same. Its political bankruptcy is not simply the outcome of individuals but expresses the parasitism and

decay of British capitalism.

As the conference got under way, there was the usual choreographed clash between a Labour leader and a trade union bureaucrat—in this instance, Len McCluskey of Unite.

Such staged conflicts are good for both parties. For Miliband, it enabled him to claim that he stands above "sectional" interests and to project Labour as the party of the worker and the businessman. For McCluskey and the rest of the trade union apparatchiks, it obscures the fact that they keep the right-wing Labour bandwagon on the road.

Unite is Labour's biggest donor, so McCluskey was obliged to stage some protest at the party's support for pay freezes and cuts. But a motion to conference condemning the coalition's pay freeze was changed to merely "note" it, and there was no pledge that Labour would reverse it.

McCluskey is one of a number of trade union leaders who, together with the likes of writer Owen Jones and the *Guardian's* Polly Toynbee and Seamus Milne, have set up a think tank, the Centre of Labour and Social Studies (Class), with the purpose of "articulating an alternative" for Labour "that will resonate with working people".

So much for the alternative!

Nevertheless, the conference won rapturous applause from Toynbee.

Attlee had "stuck to deeply unpopular rationing," she wrote. Was Balls "tough enough" to do the same?

"No one with a passing acquaintance with Balls thinks he lacks an iron football boot to stamp on any shadow minister who promises something without his say-so. Without that rigour, the election is lost.

"So what's the point of Labour if it's just as ruthless? Vince Cable joked acidly that Balls's rabble-rousing rhetoric amounted to no more than one year's difference in deficit reduction", Toynbee wrote. "He's right..."

An iron boot to stamp out spending promises, rigour and ruthlessness. Such is the real relationship between Labour and the working class championed by the trade unions, Toynbee, et al.



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