

British Prime Minister Blair tells Labour Party conference "the class war is over"

By Chris Marsden
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There was an unreal quality to proceedings at this year's Labour Party conference. In his 55-minute keynote speech, Prime Minister Tony Blair set out a messianic vision for the 21st century with all his, by now familiar, grandiose pomposity.

It would be a "century of progressive politics after one dominated by Conservatives", with Britain, a "nation, based not on privilege, class or background, but on the equal worth of all."

Naturally, Blair's "distaste" for privilege was not meant to imply a commitment to genuine social equality. Quite the contrary. "Not equal incomes... Equal rights. Equal responsibilities." Blair boasted, "The class war is over".

Even the term "conservatism" was redefined. "The 21st century will not be about the battle between capitalism and socialism but between the forces of progress and the forces of conservatism", amongst whom were listed anyone committed to old-style social reformism, including those within Labour's own ranks.

In place of this would be "economic competence", "prudence", "welfare to work" policies and authoritarian "law-and-order" measures. "It is time to move beyond the social indifference of right and left, libertarian nonsense masquerading as freedom... This generation wants a society free from prejudice, but not from rules, from order." Mussolini would have been proud.

Coming as it did on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Independent Labour Party, Blair took the opportunity to once more bemoan what he considers the historically mistaken attempt to create a party for the working class. "One hundred years ago, the circumstances of our birth and our political childhood was such we never realised our potential. Born in separation from other progressive forces in

British politics, out of the visceral need to represent the interests of an exploited workforce, our base, our appeal, our ideology was too narrow."

The assembled delegates lapped all this up. The pro-Labour press was equally ecstatic, none more so than the *Guardian*. Columnist Jonathan Freedland wrote that, "Labour's struggle is no longer to be limited to the narrow battles of class interest: now it is to fight a larger war, one that relates to the whole British people and what kind of society we create. This has been the grammar of US progressive politics for most of the century; now Britain is catching up."

"Morale is sky high", said Polly Toynbee. "Everything looks good, everything is working, money is starting to flow, nothing serious has gone wrong. There has been no great betrayal... it's hard to find a cloud in the sky".

Toynbee was even enamoured of the "packed meetings" which "earnestly debate the intricacies of policy", amidst the admitted "usual flotillas of besuited young men with muted ties and mobiles, that political cadre of wannabes on the make".

Of course, the Labour conference long ago ceased to be a genuine debate about policy, having become a media event along the model of a US-style party convention. So much so that even Jeremy Paxman of the BBC described such party assemblies as "gatherings of the undead" and "a fraud on the public".

But the self-congratulation, mutual backslapping and fawning upon the "Great Leader" were not all contrived. The Labour leadership and its hangers-on give every indication of believing their own immense publicity machine.

On one level this can be accounted for by the fact that there has never been a government that is so isolated from the people it claims to represent. The conference

itself summed this up. Those in attendance were well-paid party functionaries, members of a largely sycophantic press corps and businessmen seeking to build relations with the ruling party and collectively willing to pay £1 million for the privilege of sharing breakfast and dinner in Blair's company on the day of his conference address. On top of this, the Conservative Party shows no sign of recovering from its devastating loss of support, while the main issue discussed within the Liberal Democrats is how far they should go in merging their fortunes with New Labour.

More significantly still is the virtual absence of the working class from political life. The major demonstrations outside conference were by farmers and the pro-fox hunting Countryside Alliance, with only one small lobby organised by loyal Labour critics amongst Britain's small radical left groups. Blair himself considers the working class a spent political and social force. His many boasts to congress included the statement: "Here's one for us to put back down a few Tory throats—fewer days lost in strikes than any of the 18 years of Tory Government."

Whatever jibes he may make against the Tories, Blair is a professed admirer of Margaret Thatcher. His political outlook has been shaped by the belief that the defeats her government was able to inflict on the working class, coupled with the collapse of the Stalinist regime in the former USSR, were really the last hurrah for socialism and the workers' movement. Though he sometimes feels the need to distance himself from the trade unions in order to please his big-business backers, he has also taken full measure of the rightward lurch of his counterparts in the TUC, and their determined role in ensuring that no challenge is made to corporate interests.

Blair and his advisers are aware of the ever-diminishing popularity of his government and its policies in Labour's former working class base. In this year's European and local elections, as well as in recent parliamentary by-elections, Labour lost votes and seats, while those going to the polls declined to as little as 20 percent of the electorate, particularly in the inner-cities that were once Labour strongholds. A recent poll found that 42 percent of those questioned believed Labour had reneged on its promises. This included 27 percent who had voted Labour at the 1997 general election. On the crucial issue of health, the majority considers that

Labour has failed and there should be higher social spending in this and other areas.

But Blair believes that passive disillusionment is the worst he faces, which can be answered by consolidating his standing amongst the affluent middle classes—who have generally determined electoral success and do so more decisively when workers do not bother to vote at all. That is why he followed his conference speech with an appeal to disillusioned Tory voters, declaring, "There is a place for you in today's Labour Party".

What Blair conceives of as New Labour's strength, however, will reveal itself to be its Achilles heel. This is a government without any significant social base. The privileged layer from which it draws support is only able to dominate political life because the broad mass of working people have found themselves politically disenfranchised by the degeneration of their old organisations. But the widespread disillusionment amongst working people towards official politics, parties and the trade unions will inevitably assume far more explosive forms in the not too distant future. The Labour Party conference revealed the complete unpreparedness, even blindness, of the British political establishment regarding such an eventuality.

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