

New Labour is Dead

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New Labour has suffered a crushing defeat. The Blair project of promoting and implementing right-wing policies in the knowledge that traditional working class voters would remain solid died on 1 May 2008. Labour's vote in the local elections in dropped to 24 percent, a point below the Liberal Democrats

and twenty points less than the Conservatives (44 percent). Given the scale of the catastrophe, It seems unlikely that Gordon Brown can win the next general election.

Awestruck by Margaret Thatcher, Blair and Brown aped her achievements within their own party, squeezing old social-democratic ideas out of themselves, drop by drop. They were all market fundamentalists now. Deregulation and privatisation became a mantra and over the last ten years the social divide in the country between rich and poor increased more than even under Thatcher. Redistribution of wealth was no longer on Labour's agenda.

As the market suffered a series of shocks---the collapse of a debt-ridden British bank, Northern Rock, led to state intervention in the form of nationalisation. No lessons were learnt. Helping the rich by further tax-cuts, abandoning (under pressure from the Financial Times) plans to tax non-domiciled billionaires symbolised the regime. The neo-liberal model atomised social and political life, weakened democratic accountability and drastically reduced the margins of reformist possibilities within the system. After 9/11 civil liberties were seriously eroded. A few weeks ago Brown and his ministers were arguing for increasing the detention of suspects to 42-days without trial. The Conservatives and police chiefs opposed this as draconian.

The British electoral system helped to conceal the relentless ebbing of popular support for the Blairite agenda. No longer. The New Labour Emperor is now revealed without any clothes. Power can shape 'truth', but not forever. That is the lesson of the New Labour defeat.

In London the choice was clear. A Conservative celebrity who carefully cultivates an ultra-reactionary image, Boris Johnson, is a star of TV comedy shows. Given the way that politics has gone to the dogs in so many parts of the democratic world, it's hardly surprising that celebrity status and wealth have taken centre stage. A somewhat pathetic and ineffectual ex-policeman stood for the Liberal Democrats or Ken Livingstone, the Labour candidate. Even though Livingstone first won as an independent against New Labour, he subsequently made his peace with Blair and rejoined the party, while preserving an independent stance on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and developing his own foreign policy by inviting Hugo Chavez to visit London.

The elections for the Mayor of London reflected the national mood. That Livingstone made mistakes is obvious. The biggest error was not in receiving an eccentric Muslim cleric and annoying the right-wing press, but re-entering the Labour fold. The basis of his popularity had rested on the fact that he was not a confected New Labour politician. The fact that margin of his defeat appears to be less than the national average reflected this fact, but was not enough to save him. The official result has yet to be declared, but New Labour commentators on TV have accepted defeat. He suffered because he was associated with an unpopular New Labour government. Had he remained an independent and lacerated the Blair and Brown regimes, instead of being photographed with them he would have been home and dry.

A city in which 70% of the citizens oppose the British presence in Iraq will now be represented by a pro-war mayor. Who cares if a million Iraqis have died since the occupation of their country, three million have become refugees and millions in that suffering country face the most horrendous conditions in their everyday lives. Anything associated with New Labour was punished.

P.S.

* Tariq Ali's memoir *Streetfighting Years: An Autobiography of the Sixties* is published by Verso.