

Editorial

Britain's new premier: Politics under Brown

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New Labour's long awaited "plan B" - the replacement of Blair by Brown when Blair became electorally damaged beyond repair - is working, at least as far as Labour's short term electoral prospects are concerned.

We have the predictable "Brown bounce", with new Labour leading the Tories for the first time in many months. Tory/Labour opinion polls were always meaningless whilst Blair was still there and until Brown took over.

The Brown bounce has brought the crisis of the Tories to a head. And this has been further compounded by the by-election results in Ealing Southall and Sedgefield - where the Tories came third behind Labour and the Lib Dems - which has been a disaster for the Tories.

This raises at least the possibility of a snap election in the autumn of this year, or more likely the spring of next year - depending on Brown's assessment of the durability of the "bounce" and when the problems are likely to set in. Although the most likely date would still be to coincide with the European elections in two years time, all options are now open. Organisations such as Respect would be well advised to take this into account.

Brown's task has always been to look different to Blair - but remain exactly the same on the key issues. This means most fundamentally the neo-liberal agenda of deregulation and privatisation, the war, the replacement of Trident and the military agenda, the new relationship with the employers, and the relationship with the USA.

It was never going to be difficult to look better than Blair of course. But Brown's record since he has been in office - and what he has already spelled out for the future is a worse situation than many on the left with illusions in him predicted.

What has strengthened Brown's hand was the failure of the Labour Left to get onto the ballot paper and make a contest. It meant that he escaped any pressure from the left and put all the cards in his hands. Instead of a political debate we had a Brown publicity campaign.

The first thing Brown made absolutely clear was that the relationship with the employers cultivated by Blair would continue and deepen. The appointment of Tory ex-CBI boss Digby Jones as minister for trade and investment (and his consequent elevation to a Peerage) in his so-called "government of all the talents" is an insult to both the trade unions and Labour voters. Jones is a longstanding enemy of the unions who has amongst other things opposed any rise in the minimum wage, blocked corporate killing laws, opposed the EU working time directive because it might reduce working hours and curtailed maternity leave.

Just to rub it in a bit deeper (and make sure private equity capital is at the heart of his government) Brown has also appointed private equity boss Damon Buffini to the Business Council of Britain and the National Council for Educational Excellence - - both bodies which deal with policy which involves the trade unions.

This means that the hostility cultivated by Blair to the unions will continue in full force under Brown. One of the first pledges Brown made at the special conference at which he was "elected" is to abolish the block vote at Labour Party conference and put even more emphasis on undemocratic policy forums and focus groups.

On the war he is indistinguishable from Blair, and on the basis of the crudest Blairite arguments: that the attempted suicide bombings in London and Glasgow airport have nothing to do with Iraq, but were carried out by people who want to destroy "our Western values".

He retained Des Browne as Defence Minister and he refuses to contemplate any suggestion of the withdrawal of the troops from Iraq, saying that Britain has to honour its international obligations: i.e. support George Bush through thick and thin. And with Bush there are no half measures - you are either with him or against him.

Brown finds himself well to the right of the US Democrats on this (and to the right of all the candidates for the Democratic nomination, even Hilary Clinton) and even to the right of some prominent Republicans. He had the option of separating himself from the Blair/Bush position on Iraq whilst remaining in line with mainstream US opinion (including the majority of the population in the USA) and refused to take it -- remaining shoulder-to-shoulder with George Bush - who will be gone in 18 months. It is a remarkable stance. Any of his ministers who have been interpreted as suggesting (whatever their actual intention) that there might be any degree of change in the relationship with Bush have been slapped down. Brown is at root at least as pro-US as Blair if not more so. It is at the core of his politics.

On civil rights Brown is not only proposing yet another terrorism bill - but is re-raising the issue of detention without trial and its extension from the current 28 day to the originally proposed 90. The police, in response to this are now saying that 90 days is now not enough and it should be for "as long as it takes". Brownite ministers have said that it is worth discussing! We now have the remarkable situation where the Tories are opposing any extension to the 28 days and New Labour are out to extend it.

And of course Brown's neoliberal credentials are impeccable. His treatment of public sector workers in the current wage round by imposing a below inflation pay freeze of between 1.9-2.5 per cent is the worst attack on public sector wages since new Labour came to office in 1997. He is fully behind the deregulation and privatisation of postal services, and the hope of the CWU leadership that he will step in and save the situation is excluded.

He talks about education and the NHS but the private finance initiative and the market are at the core of everything he says. He talks about the scandal of the housing crisis and building 3m new homes, but he is not committing himself to resuming the construction of council houses. He is talking about private provision, housing associations, and partnership deals, which will put council tax money straight into the pockets of private business.

And if climate change is not effectively tackled finding places to build houses which are safe against extreme weather events will get increasingly difficult. The one potentially progressive issue he is raising is that of constitutional reform. Of course he chooses this issue on which to make his name (or not as the case might be) precisely because it is something he can do which does not challenge the core issues of neo-liberal economics and US global politics. This, however, does not make it any less important. He is proposing a constitutional reform bill and a Scottish-style constitutional convention. He proposes the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement by with a wholly elected second chamber elected by a proportional system.

But a constitutional convention raises much more than the discrete measures Brown himself puts on the table. It raises the issue of the monarchy and of a democratic republic. It raises the issue of the disestablishment of the Church of England. It raises the issues of the powers of the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament, and probably of a referendum on independence in Scotland. Of course Brown will oppose most of these things. And it raises the issue of electoral reform for the House of Commons. It would be scandalous if a constitutional convention left first-past-the-post for the Commons in place.

It would not be easy to avoid the issues once a constitutional convention took place, however. Brown is saying he wants to reconnect politics to people. But that is impossible if a system of election is retained which means that for the majority of people their vote does not count and that governments get "elected" by big majorities on minority votes. It would not only be a scandal it would be a massive lost opportunity once the constitutional issues are put on the agenda in this way.

It is important, therefore, that the left engages this process and launches the widest possible campaign on electoral reform for Westminster. Otherwise it will be left to the Lib Dems to make the running and they are not capable of doing so. They have raised the issue but have not given it great profile. Brown has said that he is not opposed to a move towards PR providing the constituency link is protected. The danger now that Brown is doing well in the polls he may well conclude that he can win the next election without making any concessions on a PR system.

The left should demand a fully proportional system under which the representation of a party should be directly equal to the votes it receives - with no arbitrary threshold designed to keep out small parties. Reconnecting people with politics involves making sure that people can vote for what they believe in without wasting their vote.

Unfortunately some of the trade union left and the bulk of the Labour left still defend first-past-the-post (FPTP) and need to be challenged where they do so. In particular the idea that FPTP is a defence against the potential growth of the fascists needs to be confronted head on. In reality fascism can only be defeated by challenging its pernicious ideas - and by mobilising the organisations of the working class against it.

Of course there will be huge opposition to any change to a PR system for the Commons - - full PR or a Scottish type half-way house - since the whole edifice of bourgeois politics in the British state is built around FPTP. The Tories would oppose any change tooth and nail and new Labour would be split. FPTP is designed to create a two party system to the exclusion of all others. And the two parties concerned will put up with its problems it creates in order to get the inevitable shot at power that it gives them. The whole system would all collapse and reshape if almost any form of PR was brought in for Commons.

Hazel Blears' proposal for a "Porto Alegre style" participatory budgeting for local government is also interesting. But again the devil will be in the detail. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre includes local mass meetings, genuine mass involvement and real debate plus elected and well informed neighbourhood assemblies, not the presenting of people with carefully chosen and very limited "choices" on expenditure. It means breaking the government strangle-hold over local government finances, otherwise the only choices on offer would be which cuts to make. If people are to be re-engaged at local level the starting point is an electoral process that gives representation in proportion to votes cast.

The most damaging development in all this for the future of the workers movement is the way the leaders of the major unions have collapsed into the Brown project. It may have been predictable but it's a disaster for the unions. It traps them in the current disastrous situation as far as the balance of

forces with the employers is concerned. Faced with an onslaught from the Brown government on jobs working conditions and pay they fall at his feet, praise his government, and do everything they can to keep it in power. Of course the same union leaders rage on about what Brown and new Labour are doing, but when it comes to a challenge they are absent.

The leaderships of all the affiliated unions send huge sums of money to bank-roll new Labour. Not even a reduced amount, the full whack – money which is even more important to new Labour since private donations started to dry up under the pressure of cash for favours scandals. When they are asked what they see as a political alternative they say “reclaim old Labour”. But old labour does not exist. All that exists is new Labour led by Gordon Brown.

Yet public sector workers have shown time and again they are ready to take action over pay as real living standards are beginning to fall. In many industries pay alone is not the only issue facing workers – speed ups, job losses, privatisations and attacks on pensions are all part of the mix for many. Local rallies that have brought together workers across different sectors have been well attended and angry. But the real potential for united action is being squandered.

PCS members have taken several days of action in defence of their conditions but now their action seems to be suspended. UNISON members in health and local government are waiting to receive their ballot papers. The situation in the NUT looks more hopeful with the last Executive Committee endorsing a move from the left to serious look at co-ordinated action in September.

And of course there is the CWU, where the postal executive has been pushed to extend industrial action following two extremely solid days of action by the membership. Postal workers need both a political and an industrial strategy -- and on both counts their existing leadership gets it wrong. All out industrial action across the public sector is needed to bust open the pay freeze – and a political alternative to new Labour is needed more desperately than ever.

There are those like Bob Crow of the RMT who know the score. He is clear that he despises new Labour, sees reclaiming Labour as dead in the water and wants a socialist alternative. But what he put forward in his closing speech at the Shop Stewards conference was not that the RMT would talk to others in the trade union movement and the left more generally about how best to go about creating a new political force. Rather he spoke about putting up anti-privatisation candidates in next years London elections so that RMT members didn't have to vote for Livingstone who was supporting privatisation of the East London line. He hoped other unions would do something similar and then talk to each other in three or four years.

Given the scale and urgency of the problem, this parochialism isn't a serious response. Even more so given that what Crow is mooted was tried by the RMT in the first set of elections for the London Assembly.

The need for a broad and pluralist alternative is as strong now as it was with Blair in office. Respect is the best attempt yet with some important electoral gains no other left organisation can match but it remains narrow and dominated by the SWP. Socialist Resistance believes that the crisis of political representation has to be resolved by a break from New Labour and the construction of a new political affiliations. While we will work as vigorously as we can to build solidarity with workers going into struggle around pay and conditions in the autumn, we know that the working class needs a political as well as an industrial answer to new Labour's neoliberalism.

P.S.

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