



WHAT'S NEXT AFTER NEW LABOUR?

by Tim Caswell

To new Labour loyalists, the Prime Minister's announcement was a similar experience to learning of the death of someone who has been terminally ill, Sad but unsurprising. Like all seminal events in the party's history it made me think of my Dad who joined the Labour Party as a teenager in 1945.

Throughout the eighties he believed he would never see another Labour government. Forty-seven years on the shop floor of an engineering factory left him with no illusions about the depths to which the party had sunk and the contempt in which working class voters held it before Neil Kinnock saved it from extinction. He believed that New Labour had returned the party to the people who voted for it out of the hands of an unrepresentative rabble. He didn't live to see the historic third term but I knew what his reaction would have been. I saw the tears in his eyes when Tony Blair said; "Labour, back as the people's party once again," at the centenary celebrations.

In nearly thirty years as a member I can only recall the Labour family showing complete unity twice: when Thatcher fell, and the day Tony Blair was elected. That inspirational sunlit day, over a decade ago, seems like yesterday. His departure really is the end of an era. Now that the Blairite chapter in Labour's history has closed what will be the fate of New Labour? What's next come the evolution?

Andrew Rawnsley wrote of John Major following the 1990 Regicide, that he had three advantages: all three were that he was not Margaret Thatcher. After the Blair-Bush axis, Iraq, dodgy dossiers, David Kelly and "loans for Lordships", Gordon Brown would appear to have the same three advantages over Tony Blair. By virtue of his personality and image the "Iron Chancellor" embodies traditional Labour values together with a Calvinistic solidity - a triumph of substance over image. Brown will be perceived to personify the antidote to spin, the antithesis of the last widely unlamented leader. John Reid's departure from centre stage is proof positive that Brown's accession is now as inevitable as Blair's departure.

That Brown's image belies his impeccable new Labour credentials will not matter, perception will be the reality. The reversion of nomenclature from new Labour, back simply to Labour: as in "best when we are Labour" will symbolize the change. This partial triumph of image over substance will afford Mr. Brown, at last the real First Lord of the Treasury, the elixir of parliamentary survival, momentum, similar to that which, between November 1990 and May 1992, was enough to secure John Major to a pyrrhic victory by a narrow margin and propel the post Thatcherite Conservative parliamentary party via Black Wednesday and sleaze into the wilderness and close to oblivion.

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That their neo liberal economic project lived on in new Labour is undeniable, not least thanks to Gordon Brown. But unprecedented cancellation of third world debt, the minimum wage (first promised by Kier Hardy), and devolution, proved that social democracy was different from conservatism. The contrast lay in marrying economic liberalism with democracy and social justice. If that was "Tory" the Tories missed the trick and bitterly opposed it.

There must be people in the Labour Party who believe in this social democratic formula more than Gordon Brown. I have yet to speak to, meet, or read the words of one of them. Leaving aside their

starkly contrasting personalities and characters, the reason Gordon Brown has the credibility Tony Blair lacks on the centre left is because Brown is a true believer in New Labour's essentially social democratic endeavour.

Prime Minister Brown's economic record together with his renewed emphasis on social justice, relative disengagement from American foreign policy, symbolized by a gradual withdrawal from Iraq, is likely to secure short term unity and a precarious fourth term. Like John Major he will be trusted but his regime will never have the dynamism of the early Blair years, just as Major could never capture that of his predecessor. The "crisis of politics", cynicism and the electoral system will simultaneously assist him and retard his initial momentum. As John Major can testify, all governments end in disappointment and fourth terms with small majorities are likely to lead to disunity and the electoral graveyard.

In this scenario the New Labour project evolves but there is no fundamental change. Blair's departure is cathartic giving the government and the party a much needed, "shot in the arm" but the "natural rhythm" of politics makes a fifth term unlikely. The Blair-Brown transition will pose, not answer, the question: what comes next after New Labour? The answer will depend on three factors: Brown's relationship with the party when in power, the succession taking place in opposition, and the evolving political configuration.

Brown's relationship with the party can best be illustrated by comparison with Tony Blair's. John O'Farrell, unofficial keeper of New Labour's conscience (a job share with Tony Robinson) speaking of "the left" in 1999 wrote, "They seem to be shocked that the Tony Blair they voted for has turned out to be a moderate social democrat of the centre left. But of course there has been no betrayal. The point about Tony Blair is that he is the first Labour Leader *not* to have moved to the right once he has taken office. He was always like that".

Very little attempt was made in the 1990's to "sell" New Labour as an idea or project to labour's membership and very few "bought in". Add to the "betrayed" the "never convinced". Once, in a Committee Room in Bradford (before we had election centres) Blair came on the television. It was contemptuously turned off. That was the day he was elected Labour leader!

A larger number tolerated Blair, "to get elected". True believers were outsiders in local Labour Parties dominated by public sector professionals. The reason was ideological and organizational. Labour's declining membership is elderly and patrician. New Labour is fundamentally non socialist. The mutual mistrust was palpable. New Labour reacted like a Leninist cadre, centralizing power and decision making while the party's outdated structures fossilized.

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As with the "triumph of the west" thesis in which anti imperialist movements are themselves shaped by the ex colonial power, Brown's coronation is the final vindication of the non socialist political settlement embodied by New Labour. The absence of a credible socialist challenge illustrates that the corpse of socialist thinking in the party is no longer even twitching. The left defined formerly by opposition to Thatcherism and latterly by opposition to Blair will be defined again by their reaction to the new leader's credo rather than their own ideas and policies.

Brown, unlike Blair has courted the Labour left who have mistaken his opposition to Blair for opposition to New Labour. Despite decoupling foreign policy from the white House and avoiding sleaze, his economic orthodoxy, commitment to PFI and intention to liberalise European economic policy, will cost British jobs and put him on the wrong side of the O'Farrell equation.

Raised expectations post Blair will fuel rebellion at the hands of a parliamentary left with disproportionate power in a fourth term with a reduced majority and an entrenched pattern of dissent. Despite his personal commitment to debt relief Brown will appear conservative on globalisation and the environment in comparison with Cameron's repositioning. The liberal Democrats will continue their incremental advance into Labour's urban heartlands, based on community politics alien to labour's traditions and personnel, conducted from their non socialist anti Tory base camp in local government.

Yet, in reality, Prime Minister Brown's position in the party will be unassailable. The Blair era has dramatically illustrated what Labour's entire history proves. Labour does not support its leaders but never removes them, especially in office. Nor will the man who fought so hard to secure the levers of power relinquish them voluntarily. Only one thing is more inevitable than his succession, his removal will be at the hands of the electorate alone. Brown's elevation will put the 1999 politics many of his supporters so despise beyond peradventure until Labour has no parliamentary power left to pursue an alternative.

The respective positions of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats on Europe, rendering coalition between them unlikely, and the impact of first past the post on third parties, make it probable that Brown's fourth term government will be replaced by a reformed Conservative party with post Cameron personnel and centrist policies. The process of renewal has started in power (for example through the compass "Shape of Things to Come" manifesto) but the fundamental philosophical question of what follows New Labour will be answered following an election defeat that will fundamentally alter the context in which the left of centre face the future.

Loss of office will take place against the backdrop of further convergence between three more equally matched parties with Europe the main dividing line. Participation will continue to decline. Current demographic trends mean that few under their forties will vote while the older generation who still see voting as a civic duty, dwindles.

The managerialist, cult of the personality, approach of all major parties combined with the corrosive effect of a cynical twenty four hour media will result in "apathy" becoming the "common sense" of political discourse.

The electoral system will continue to suffocate challenges to the orthodoxy. Membership of the three parties combined, already less than the membership of the RSPB, will be confined to ageing activists, office holders and their payroll following the advent of state funding.

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What in these conditions would be the fundamental prerequisites for Labour's survival for the duration of the 21st century? First, a new relationship between the Labour Party and the public. This should involve a change of name and a massive extension of the "supporter" concept successfully pioneered by MPs such as Martin Salter in Reading. Activists would be refocused to equate a voter with a supporter who could be recruited to engage with the party on a non-activist non-meeting basis. Supporters could then interact with the party leadership, conference and the National Policy Forum directly. Members would be organized in single units in geographical areas removing the bureaucratic multiple committee structure that Ian McCartney correctly observed would be one of the few aspects of our society Kier Hardy would recognize. A cabinet or board elected by one member one vote would run the new unit. Meetings would be open to all members and supporters.

Realignment of the left should be explored through consultation with the party, supporters, the general public and the Liberal Democrats. Phillip Gould's book, "Blair the Unfinished Revolution", expounds the historical rationale for reuniting the social democratic (or interventionist) and liberal (individualist) wings of the left. Their fractures in the twentieth century resulted in Conservative hegemony. The case for reunification should be advanced as a matter of high principle not sordid short term pragmatism.

Closely allied to realignment should be electoral reform. A system of fair votes based on single member constituencies such as the Alternative Vote will attract some popular support from a dwindling deregistered electorate and convince other parties that Labour has finally embraced pluralism. The new name of the party (possibly the Social Democratic Liberal Party) should await realignment, but coalition and electoral reform should form part of the programme even if formal realignment fails.

The historic challenge, that only a united social democratic centre left can meet, will be to make the case for Europe. This single most significant failure of new Labour was the product of the leadership's timidity fashioned by the prospect of facing a Tory nationalist coalition in a winner takes all contest. The new generation must hear the historical, peaceful, economic and political (global influ-

ence) case for Europe for the first time.

Their real choice is between “Little Britain”, the “fifty first state” or a social democratic government at the heart of a social democratic, but more economically liberal, Europe. It is here the connections could be made between formal politics, idealism and the “single issues” like global warming and fair trade that still engage sections of the public. For too long the European project has been an a la’ carte’ menu from which Britain selects the main course after the sweet trolley has been depleted by the hosts. This century the European question must be resolved, in a once and for all, in or out”, referendum.

A modern democracy must include a democratic bi-cameral parliament and genuine unitary local government elected by AV. The hereditary principle including the political influence of the monarch, exercise of the royal prerogative and the honours system should be abolished. The renamed second chamber should reflect the political strength of all the parties represented in the commons and include citizen’s jurors sitting for a fixed term. Regions will be an inevitable but unpopular consequence of the new hard won pro European settlement.

The report of the, “Power Commission” provides a starting point for renewing democracy itself. Elections should use new technology and last over several days. Much can be learned from the ability of popular youth culture to engage a generation to whom, expensive” voting” is almost a daily experience in response to media dilemmas offering clear choices and instant results following individual choices made in peoples own homes.

A real distinction must be made between being a subject and a citizen. The latter really should entail responsibilities as well as rights especially in relation to the environment. Those who recycle should pay less in local taxes whilst those who pollute should pay the full cost. Shared car lanes and free public transport should accompany full cost air travel. As with Social Democracy and Europe people must be persuaded to identify with the idea of environmentalism not individual policies. This would involve leading not always following public opinion. The realignment of the progressive coalition will underpin this.

Traditional political education using modern media should be rediscovered. The culture of the Labour Party would change significantly overnight if every member read, [“Sweden’s New social Democratic Model: proof that a better world is possible” by Robert Taylor](#), today. A renewed party should generate a credo in a similar format and promote it widely through reading circles, Video and DVD. Very gradually, the political awareness of the party, its supporters, the media and the public would increase. No doubt the political elite will cringe, but the Christian Alpha Course is not too populist a role model. Those who sneer would “critique” the “violin concerto” while the Nero lost his deposit in the Rome east by election.

These profoundly brave but simple steps represent a British “Badgodesburg”, the conference in 1968 at which Labour’s German sister party made the historic break with Marxism before taking West Germany from strength to strength. By replacing the remnants of the ideas of economic socialism and determinism, based on pseudo Marxism, with social democracy, positive freedom, individual liberty and greater equality Labour must stop being ashamed of social democracy and embrace it with pride. The new politics will embrace the future.

Such an historic break with the past would create a philosophy unrecognizable to Marx, Engel’s, Lenin, and Trotsky, but familiar to John Bunyan, Tom Paine, and Karl Popper. It would embrace the empirical work of Phillip Gould as well as the post-modern theory of the brilliant sociologist Anthony Giddens. The zeitgeist would shift gradually to include the discussion of ideas, commonplace elsewhere in Europe.

Such a shift represents a break with the culture of short term thinking, media driven policy discussion, soap opera and managerialism, that Paddy Ashdown, one of the few genuinely popular political figures of the post war era, warns will lead to further decline in the body politic. Tony Blair told the Labour Conference, ten years ago, “learn from the past but don’t live in it”. For those experiencing de

ja vu this prescription should sound familiar. It is the original New Labour project. That's what's next after New Labour!

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