

## Great Britain: from 'Thatcherism' to 'Blairism'

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### Abstract

The year 2007 marks the tenth anniversary of the victory of Tony Blair's New Labour at the General Election after eighteen years of Conservative rule. It is also the time when, just before resigning the leadership, his popularity has reached the lowest level in the opinion polls. The participants in this round table thought this was a good opportunity not only to assess his legacy but to examine the development in British politics during the last thirty years. The aim of the present debate was to analyse in what direction the country had evolved under the influence of the most important politicians of the period, Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair, and to offer a complete picture of the state of the nation after three decades of change in the institutional and social structure of the country. Our interventions divided the period chronologically. Elena Oliete, from the University of Zaragoza, examined the impact in Britain of Thatcherism as an economic creed and a political project. Secondly, Dr José Francisco Fernández, from the University of Almería, focused on the period between Thatcher's resignation in November 1990 and Tony Blair's landslide victory in 1997. Finally Dr Celia Wallhead, from the University of Granada, made a revision of the Blair years (1997-2007). What follows is a brief summary of our talks, which were a preliminary step to a lively and fruitful debate on British politics.

### 1. Thatcherism

When analysing Thatcherism, controversial debates arise on the question of its definition: whether it was a fully developed economic and political project or just Mrs Thatcher's style of government, and whether it came as an electoral, ideological and political watershed or as a logical development of the politics implemented in the previous decades. In any case, nobody can deny that the 1979 election marked the beginning of an important change in British politics. Since the end of the Second World War, both the Conservative and Labour Parties agreed in the application of the so-called "consensus politics" based on government intervention, management of the economy to maintain full employment and no fluctuation of prices. However, after the 1979 victory of the Conservative party the new government turned to the application of monetarist and neo-liberalist policies.

Nevertheless, Thatcherism should not be seen as a solitary movement or experiment. On the contrary, at the end of the 70s there was a general inclination of Western governments towards market-oriented policies as an attempt to face the several oil crises that had occurred on a world-wide scale (the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the deposition of the Shah of Iran in 1979-80). In other words, the measures adopted in Britain were not exclusively due to a shift in power towards conservatism. This same tendency was also evident for instance, in Spain, France and Sweden which were under left-wing rule for most of the same period. The difference is that in Britain, the shift to freer markets involved greater tensions associated with a blitz on intermediate sources of authority between the state and the individual. So the peculiarity of Britain is that, whereas on the one hand, wider liberalism and free markets were slowly imposed, on the other, the state power became more and more centralised in order to eliminate corporatism (Brittan, 1991: 3-4).

As a means of revitalising the economy and promoting incentives to enterprise, the Conservative party had as its main creed the defence of a free market economy, the cutting of social services, tax reductions and disappearance of the welfare state (Riddell, 1991: 18). The first main commitment in Thatcher's agenda was to cut taxes. However, at the same time, as a counter-measure, indirect taxation was considerably

increased. The second one was good housekeeping, that is, fomenting prudence and balanced budgets. Lastly, the third commitment was the control of public spending by means of privatisation of the, until then, nationalised public entities: the telephone system, British Gas, the Trustees Savings Bank, British Aerospace, Britoil, Rolls-Royce, British Airports, British Railways, electricity and water (Young, 1989: 147).

Simultaneously, Thatcher constructed an inclusive, populist version of the Tory party, especially after the jingoistic, flag-waving "victory" of the Falklands War and her polemical debates in the European Community meetings, concerning Britain's budgetary contribution to European funds (CAP) in order to defend the interests of her country. Over and above all, with the privatization of national entities, Thatcher or "Thatcherism" felt that they were actively providing people with the opportunity to participate in the national economy opening up the possibility for people to become individual shareholders of new and necessarily pushy conglomerates in the world market, instead of being anonymous tax-payers. In the same manner, the sale of council flats to tenants (turning one million families into homeowners) helped to stir up Thatcher's populism.

Taking all these views into account, it is not surprising that Thatcher found her prime political enemies in Trade Unions, whose commitment to collective rights and workers' protections stood in direct conflict with her belief in the unrestricted play of free markets. Thatcher succeeded in passing a series of anti-union laws, and with the final collapse of the coal miners' strike of 1984-5, the power of unions was drastically reduced.

According to Stuart Hall, Thatcherism managed to combine a forward-looking economy with a set of moralist values based on Victorian ideals (Hall, 1990: 29). Thatcher's "moral crusade" encouraged individualism and self-reliance, as well as nationalism and patriotism tinged with the wish to recover Britain's long-lost outstanding position in the world (Savage, 1990: 5-6), together with the maintenance of the traditional family, repressing those lifestyles which contradicted her ideology (homosexuals, single mothers, trades union activists, ravers and demonstrators) (Lay, 2002: 79-80).

Despite the attempt to project inner unity through discourses on national identity, her aggressive economic policy implied unavoidable divisions within the country. As John Hill suggests:

... the politico-legal aspects of Thatcherism, and the ideological rhetoric was often at odds with its economic effects. Thus, despite the Thatcher regime's appeal to order, unity and social cohesion, it was evident that Thatcherite economic policies were contributing to an increase in social divisions and conflicts (1999: 10).

As a consequence of the rationalisation of the industry (e.g. closing down of a number of non-productive pits) a growing section of the population came to suffer unemployment and poverty (in 1985 there were over 3 million people unemployed). Non-white citizens also had to face a growing racism, implicit in the discourses in which Britishness was associated with whiteness, and which, therefore, always excluded them. In this context, a new kind of racism emerged, which was no longer based on racial superiority but on the threat a destabilizing "Other" caused to white national unity. In part, it was the difficult situation of unemployment and poverty as well as the racist attitudes towards black people that provoked violent riots in poor areas which were often inhabited by immigrant communities. However, the Prime Minister did not accept unemployment as the justification for rioting. Far from trying

to solve the problem of youth unemployment and the harsh living conditions of the marginalised groups, the government's concern was bent on law and order (Solomos, 1993: 160). None the less, the amount of recorded crime actually rose by 60 per cent during the Thatcher years (Hill, 1999: 10).

Towards the end of her mandate, by the 1990s, the boom of the 1980s had ended in trade deficit, huge inflation and continuing unemployment. Similarly, she presided over declining manufacturing output, labour productivity, and business investment. Thatcher compounded these unfavourable economic statistics by passing an extremely unpopular poll tax. Introduced in Scotland first, it went into effect in England and Wales in 1990. The poll tax replaced the somewhat more progressive local property tax and it fell equally on all adults between eighteen and sixty-five. The unpopular measure rapidly diminished the political support that Thatcher had enjoyed up till then. A massive London protest demonstration was organised, ultimately turning into violent riots.

However, what was seen as the last straw which led to Thatcher's downfall, was her increasing confrontation with the European Community which ended in her stubborn refusal to join the Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1989, against the wishes of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson. Her own party, fearing the loss of seats, forced her unwilling resignation in November 1990, thus putting an end to the so-called Thatcher decade, but continuing with the same political trend under the auspices of a new Prime Minister, John Major.

## 2. Majorism

John Major projected the image of a mild-mannered, easy-going man, just what the Conservative party (and the country at large) needed after more than a decade of a hyperactive leader. Besides, he never exposed his political creed, so that there was the feeling that a period of calm in politics was in order. At the beginning of his premiership he was vague enough to say that he wanted to create a classless society and to improve the public services, but in fact the main characteristic of his governments was that of continuity with the Thatcher years. David Dutton rightly explains the ambiguity of John Major's term in office when he writes: "Even allowing for a less abrasive approach, Major's policies were always likely to appear less radical than his predecessor's precisely because so many of the key intellectual battles of the 1980s (...) had already been won" (1997:145). Dutton adds that Major had to face a narrow parliamentary majority, and therefore he had to pay more attention to the signs of approval within his own party than to a clearly defined political programme. The clearest example of his negotiation in the troubled waters of political life can be found in his position towards Europe. Although he wanted Britain to be "at the heart of Europe", the eurosceptic strand in the conservative party was gaining ground. He was impelled to negotiate an opt-out on the EMU and on the social chapter when the Maastricht Treaty was signed in February 1992. He wanted Britain to be in the leading wagon, but did not want his administration to get enmeshed in European administration.

The first measure he carried out to show that Thatcher was not driving the Prime Minister's car from the back seat was the replacement of the infamous Poll Tax by a more sensible form of local taxation, but on the whole his personal initiatives ended in beautifully-expressed formulas which really meant an extension of Thatcherism in public services, like the so-called "Citizen's Charter" (Marwick, 2000: 341) or in empty slogans to appease the right of the party, like his "back to basics" campaign of 1993.

In economic matters, Major continued with the objective of fighting against inflation, although the withdrawal of the pound from the ERM on Black Wednesday (16

September 1992) placed the government's economic policy in a difficult position. Among other measures, his governments reduced the funding in scientific investment, the power of quangos was reinforced and he famously launched the National Lottery in order to provide money for the arts.

During the period when John Major was Prime Minister, however, the real political changes in Britain were taking place in the opposition. Labour was in the process of becoming a party with serious possibilities of challenging the Tories in the general elections. It was Neil Kinnock who had initiated a process of reforms in the Labour Party in the late eighties (acceptance of the market forces and privatisation, compromise against high taxes, abandonment of unilateralism, etc.). Kinnock's successor in the leadership, John Smith, continued timidly with the move towards modernisation, but when he died in May 1994, a youthful and charismatic leader pushed the reforms towards limits which would have been unthinkable a few years before. Tony Blair had been an MP since 1983, and he had always toed the party's line. However, he felt that the organisation lacked internal democratisation and a modern approach to engage with the electorate. With the help of other modernisers (Gordon Brown, Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell) he trimmed the fat off the old party and left it fit for the combat. As Shadow Employment Secretary his role had been crucial for Labour's abandonment of its support of the closed shop, and as leader he devoted his energies to removing Clause IV from the party's constitution. Clause IV was basically an emotional issue, as it committed Labour to the pursuit of a socialist state. In the party conference of April 1995 the clause was removed and his position as leader was greatly reinforced.

As regards fresh thinking about elections and new ways of approaching the audience, Blair learnt a lot from America, particularly from the Presidential campaign of Bill Clinton. Since the late eighties and during the early nineties, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair paid a number of visits to America and talked to important people in the US administration. They learnt how to use the media in their favour and they understood that, if they wanted to win, they had to change the face of the old party. The middle classes would not like to be ruled by an organization too close to the unions. Peter Mandelson must be credited with much of the merit of building the new image of Blair as a cheerful and promising figure in the early nineties, and Alastair Campbell, the other master of spin and coordinator of Labour's campaign, should be held responsible for directing the press towards a favourable view of New Labour. In fact, their great victory before the 1997 general elections was to put Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* on their side.

During the political campaign, Blair took great pains not to give any specific details on a hypothetical Labour government; he made sure that the voters got the message that on important issues, such as the management of the economy, Labour would not let the country down. As a result of all this, on 1 May 1997 Labour achieved a majority of 179 seats, the largest landslide in the history of the Labour Party.

### 3. Blairism

By the time the Proceedings of this Conference are published, Tony Blair will no longer be Prime Minister, and we will be talking about the Brown era or the Cameron era, or the whoever era. The day before the Conference, Blair was interviewed by the police over the "cash for honours" scandal. Just after Christmas, there was a drama on TV developing the hypothesis that Blair might be hauled before the Court of Human Rights in The Hague for his responsibility in the Iraq war. Both issues will obviously loom large in the formation of our view of Britain's last Prime Minister of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But Tony Blair's legacy -or the positive or negative evaluation of it- depends upon which newspaper you read. If you read *The Guardian*, you would probably agree with most of the points Blair made in his "farewell speech" at the Labour Conference in September 2006. But if you read, for example, *The Daily Mail*, you might suspect the veracity of some of the points and not be so supportive. His speech was heralded by a video boasting of New Labour's 50 "finest achievements." The next day, three writers for *The Daily Mail* dissected these boasts and offered what they call a true picture. "Refuting the 50 top achievements set out in Blair's farewell speech at the Labour Party Conference in Manchester" (*The Daily Mail*, 27/9/06) starts with Health and Education, Blair's priorities when he came to office in 1997, and shows that, contrary to his boast that Labour had "cut waiting" and "cancer deaths", the truth is that "NHS spending has doubled under Labour while a deficit of 500 million pounds this year has led to bed closures, cancelled operations and sacked doctors." While Blair boasted that Britain has "the best educated children in our history", the truth is that "Almost half of all boys and a third of girls leave primary school unable to write properly." Similar damning disclosures are made in the other areas Blair boasted about: The Middle East, The Constitution, Saving Africa, Crime, The military, Asylum and Immigration, Welfare, and The Family.

In spite of all these failures to come up to expectations, the government is not accused of not working. On the contrary, they have been working very hard. New Labour have brought in 3,000 new laws, that is, one for EVERY day "Mr Blair and Co. have been in power." (*The Daily Mail*, 17/8/06). The trouble is, most of these laws deal with issues that, either are not relevant to most people's daily lives, like a ban on causing a nuclear explosion or entering the hull of the Titanic without permission, or they intrude too much into our personal affairs, like authorising cameras everywhere for a Big Brother-style invigilation, so that we can be given on-the spot fines for putting our rubbish out on the wrong day or going one mile per hour above the limit.

In spite of being *The Guardian's* Sunday paper, *The Observer* started the year 2006 with scathing criticism of the Prime Minister:

Historians will remember Tony Blair for many things: his mastery of spin and deceit; his readiness to commit British troops to a wretchedly wrong war; his administrative incompetence; his shameful sale of honours to boost Labour funds. But perhaps his most lasting legacy of all will be the destruction of privacy in the UK. ("Comment", 26/2/06, p. 25)

Blair was invited to comment on this and refute it with what he called "the true record", and this is what he had to say:

This government has introduced the Human Rights Act, so that, for the first time, a citizen can challenge the power of the state on the basis of an infringement of human rights, and the Freedom of Information Act, the most open thing any British government has done since the Reform Acts of the 1830s. (*ibid.*)

If we wish to be sympathetic to Mr Blair, we may say that this situation is the logical outcome of what happened on 9/11 in New York. In spite of more freedoms

opening up in the name of transparency, accountability and fairness, other freedoms are lost through measures against terrorists and other criminals.

With the end of the Blair era in sight, books on the subject are proliferating. Craig Brown, in his *The Tony Years* (Ebury 2006), picks out eight symbols of the period. The first is a Big Brother camera: "The Tony Years saw four million CCTV cameras erected throughout Britain, or one for every 14 people." The second is an intervention by Patricia Hewitt (the Health Secretary) on Radio 4's "Today" programme: "Hewitt's mixture of chumminess, condescension and bossiness is the authentic tone of The Tony Years." Third is John Prescott's croquet mallet, which needs no further comment, unless you would like one of "Two Jaguars"'s own comments: "My position is that I want to make our position clear -the example in Germany is just one example, for example." Another symbol was a king-size packet of cheese and onion crisps to represent child obesity. And so on. Perhaps Craig Brown is hard on Blair and Co. in the interests of ironic fun. A more serious and thought-provoking book is Simon Jenkins's *Thatcher and Sons: A Revolution in Three Acts* (Allen Lane 2006). Jenkins sets out to show that Tony Blair's famous New Labour landslide of 1997 was not a watershed in British politics. On the contrary, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown have, in practice, if not in theory, set out to consolidate and even build on the Thatcher legacy. The veracity of this surprising assertion is no doubt something that only time will prove, as the different aspects and priorities of the "Tony Years", the decade 1997-2007, fall into perspective.

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