

New Beginnings? Or Dark Days Ahead?

Joe Marino

New Leader, new direction? That's the question many trade unionists have been asking over the last few months as Tony Blair's long goodbye meandered to a conclusion, and Gordon Brown's coronation came and went. Time, of course, will tell, but early signs are not encouraging. It seems there will be changes to the packaging but the content will not be much different as far as trade unionists will be concerned.

Of course, there will be relief that a more open form of government – dare we say, more democratic – will be practised. But it is content that counts, not presentation. We had all hoped that lesson had been learnt by now. There may well be intention to further democratise the monarchical basis of the British State, but we need to see the detail. In any event, the long grass is getting longer as we wait. Or is this a cunning plan to eliminate the Peers by outliving them?

What is deeply alarming is the embrace of business and the total disregard of workers' interests. So that arch opponent of the national minimum wage, Digby Jones, is given a government adviser's post, but representatives of low paid workers are shunned. Has he really changed from his 'the unions are irrelevant' phase? I doubt that, and now such a philosophy is welcomed into Government decision making. And not even the fig leaf of a token trade union baron to mask the charade! As an example of the way forward, that is not encouraging. There will not be many ex-CBI bosses canvassing and working for Labour at the next election, will there? Here, as he built his new big tent team, was an opportunity for Gordon Brown to at least signal his intention of listening to the interest of the working people of Britain. Instead, it – and they – are shunned. No attempt even to balance the interests of business and labour – quite the reverse, in fact.

The contest for the Deputy Leadership did begin a process of dialogue and discussion. The

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majority of the candidates had in common the need to restore trust and democracy, to reconnect with the Party base whilst reaching out in a positive way to those outside the Party. It would be a pity if this was not built on and expanded so that a rebuilding of trust in the political process can begin. That is sadly needed and Gordon Brown has a unique opportunity to lead in this process. The issues raised in that campaign need expanding and the campaign itself seen as a basis for development of working class policies.

No doubt there will be things that workers will be able to support in the 'new' government's programme – no one will argue, for example, with more affordable house-building (bet they will – the 'not in my back yard' brigade), but it is the real direction and commitment of government policy that will decide attitudes. Certainly, the 'interests' of the big builders need tackling if this is to be a success. And more powers need to be given to local councils (along with a strengthening of local democracy) so they can build for need, not for profit. The jury is still well and truly out in this area, though early signs are not promising.

But we have lived off scraps for too long. The litany of 'advantages' trundled out by New Labour Blairites and their apologists to divert criticism from fundamental demands of the labour movement were nothing more than a smoke screen to shift the focus away from the failures to deliver even on the weak slogan of 'fairness not favours'. Those holding their breath for the deliverance of the Warwick Agreement, for example, would today be in the Guinness Book of Records for such a feat.

Whilst many of us are critical of the democratic deficit in the European Union, there are still some advantages to be drawn. Without a doubt, it is easier to sack workers in Britain than in the rest of the EU. The Tories now propose to make it easier still. Employers who dismiss workers in the United Kingdom escape the social cost of their actions, whilst in other EU countries they are made to pay that cost. Here is a quick win for Gordon Brown – full implementation of the Social Chapter, with no opt out. Of course, big business will not tolerate that, so the Government won't even discuss it. They would, it seems, prefer to give the employers the freedom to sack at will. Whilst at the same time continuing to deny workers, via their unions, the right to organise against such actions, and to restrict severely the unions' ability to resist employer action by the use of draconian anti-labour laws. Instead of opposing John McDonnell's Trade Union Freedom Bill, we should be looking to a Brown Government to embrace it and promote it. Again, I fear we will be disappointed.

Internal Party democracy is an essential ingredient of any living labour organisation. For many it was the emasculation of Party democracy that led to the disillusionment with the Blairites and their programme. Iraq would have been impossible had the Labour Party had any vestige of internal democracy. Denied any avenue to vent their fury over such a débâcle, members chose to leave the Party – the only form of protest left to them. Not that this bothered the Blairites, who had no time for the Party, its members and affiliates in any event. Only foot soldiers at election time as far as they were concerned. So, in many ways, Gordon

Brown will be judged on the restoration of inner Party democracy. For a start, the right of Constituency Labour Parties and affiliated organisations to place on the Conference agenda issues of concern to them and to have them openly debated – rather than being shunted off to some Forum where they have little say and even less influence – is a must.

There needs to be a dynamic interplay between the Party and Unions, one built on respect and shared values. We are a long way from that – at least as far as ordinary union members are concerned – and a lot of work needs doing to rebuild that relationship. Of course, we will not get all we want – life is not like that. But, to be listened to with respect, to be given the same access as business, to have the party recognise there is a world outside the lobbyists and *Daily Mail*, will be a start.

We need to see a reconnection between the two wings of the labour movement and it is on progress in that reconnection that much will depend. Let us not forget that Gordon Brown was as much an architect of New Labour as was Tony Blair. If all we are to see is the same old policy only dressed in new clothes then there are dark days ahead. Unions need to use whatever influence they have in the Party to ensure a new direction from a new Government, one based on supportable policies that deliver the goods for working people and their families. As I said at the start – the jury is still well and truly out.

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