

# The Prospects for Labour

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The prospects for the Labour Government under Gordon Brown depend not solely upon the convictions of one person, no matter how strongly he personally may seek to influence events, but on the response of the entire labour movement to the challenges that face Britain.

The propensity for favourable change under the leadership of Gordon Brown is better than it was under Tony Blair. Blair had very shallow roots in the labour movement and, to judge by many of his statements and actions, many of his convictions are far removed from those traditionally associated with organised labour. He appeared to prefer the profit motivation of the private sector to the public service ethos of the public sector. Hence his perpetuation of the policy of privatisation. He discarded the traditional policy of the labour movement on public sector housing at affordable rents for working people, built under local authority control and often with direct labour. He appeared to be indifferent to the growing inequality in British society. On education, to which he claimed he would give priority, he is remembered for further undermining the comprehensive principle, for the introduction of so-called academies with their wealthy sponsors, and for student fees. On trade union rights he failed to repeal some of the worst features of the anti-union legislation inherited from previous Tory governments. Under Tony Blair the British Government often argued in Europe for 'flexibility' as a means of avoiding the regulation of working conditions for the benefit of workers.

In international affairs Tony Blair is remembered as the most sycophantic supporter of one of the most reactionary Presidents in the history of the United States. The folly of this policy has been very costly. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost, principally citizens of Iraq, but also including British troops. Iraq has been reduced to violent chaos, and religious extremism has been given a boost

in many countries as a response to the injustice of a war based on lies and deception.

It is important not to overlook that Gordon Brown was a member of the Blair administration throughout its period of office. He cannot escape his share of the responsibility for many of the policies pursued since 1997. On the other hand, within his own area of special responsibility, some measures were taken more in keeping with the traditions of the labour movement. He introduced tax changes designed to help the poorest in society. During his period of office as Chancellor of the Exchequer a relatively high level of employment was maintained, and there was economic growth. From his earlier writings it is clear that Gordon Brown had roots in the labour movement.

Future prospects do not, however, depend solely or even mainly on the personal differences of view between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Even more important will be the response of the labour movement and particularly the influence of the unions.

During recent years a new generation of trade union leaders have been elected. Predominately they are to the left of centre rather than to the right of centre. The trade union movement is not dominated by Blairites. These elections have been an indication of the thinking of the rank-and-file of the trade union movement.



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Unfortunately, it cannot be claimed that this trend in the unions has had much influence on the Labour leadership. Indeed, in recent years the powers of the Labour Party conference have been significantly curtailed, yet it is at the conference and through the trade union representatives on the National Executive Committee of the Party that trade union influence has traditionally been exerted.

The plain fact is that the constitutional changes made by the Labour Party — which have helped to reduce trade union influence — would not have been possible if the unions had opposed them. The unions have, for the most part, gone along with the constitutional changes that have diminished their potential power to influence policy.

This is not simply a constitutional issue. It is above all a trade union and political issue affecting the whole direction of the labour movement. It is, of course, true that trade union membership is not much more than 50 per cent of what it was at its maximum a generation ago, but the unions are still the bedrock of the British labour movement. Some union leaders have spoken out with their criticisms, but they need to be joined by others.

Moreover there is plenty of evidence that public opinion, and particularly working-class opinion, is receptive to a radical message. The majority are not in favour of creeping privatisation. They believe that the gross inequality of British society is unjust. They are in favour of good public services. They want an expanded housing programme, with a substantial role for local authorities. They want better pensions for the elderly and, in particular, the restoration of the link between earnings and State pensions. They are in favour of the early withdrawal of British troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The first tentative signs of changes of policy have come from within the Brown administration. The vital necessity now and in the months ahead is for a clear and unambiguous call from the trade union movement for changes in direction on a range of issues affecting the welfare and security of working people. This would not harm the Labour Government. On the contrary, it would help it.