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Britain

# More Than Blair Will Give

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**The defeat of the Tory government after eighteen years in power, and the election of Tony Blair's New Labour party, will lead to major changes in British politics. But most of these changes will not be thanks to the new government, but in spite of or in response to it.**

The huge Tory defeat, far greater than anyone had expected, has left the party demoralised and directionless. More than half of the Conservative MPs were defeated, while those remaining are fighting bitterly over leadership of the rump that is left. Seven members of John Major's cabinet lost their seats, including Michael Portillo, a potential right-wing contender for the party leadership. The Tories now have no MPs in Scotland or Wales, and very few in urban England. The divisions and recriminations in the party are likely to leave it unable to bid effectively for a return to power for many years.

Although the Labour party was the main benefactor of this crushing defeat, winning an unprecedented 419 seats, other parties also benefited from the Tory collapse. The Liberal Democrats doubled their parliamentary representation to 46, the Scottish Nationalists doubled theirs from three to six, Sinn Fein won two seats in Northern Ireland, and journalist Martin Bell, standing as an independent with backing from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, defeated corrupt Tory incumbent Neil Hamilton in an archetypal Conservative seat in suburban Manchester.

## Left of Labour

The parties to the left of Labour had mixed results. In Glasgow, community activist Tommy Sheridan, a member of the Socialist Party (formerly Militant), standing for the Scottish Socialist Alliance (SSA), received 11.1%. Other SSA candidates fared less well, with an average vote just over 1%. Former Labour MP Dave Nellist, standing for the Socialist Party in Coventry, received 6.5%.

Miners leader Arthur Scargill, standing for the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) in Newport, Wales, received 5.2%. A handful of SLP candidates did even better. [\[1\]](#) In Cardiff Central, Terry Burns won 5.3%, with an explicitly revolutionary platform,.

In East Ham (East London), lawyer Imran Khan recorded the party's best result, winning 6.8% in a constituency where the Labour party was accused of not paying attention to the demands of a large Asian population. Khan is a well known local activist, and ran a very active campaign in opposition to the far-right British Nationalist Party (BNP), which received 3.2% in that constituency. The combined vote of left-of-Labour candidates was about 70,000.

## Right wing extremists

The fascist National Front polled over 1,000 votes in a number of London seats. In the East London area of Bethnal Green, where all three main parties stood black candidates, they took 7.5% of the votes.

Anglo-French businessman James Goldsmith's anti-Maastricht Referendum Party gained over 80,000 votes. Since he is believed to have spent L20 million of his vast fortune on the campaign, this works out at about L25 (US\$40) per vote.

Anti-abortion candidates did badly, and as is traditional neither the Natural Law Party nor the Monster Raving Loony Party gained high votes.

## Labour's first steps in government

Following the results, Blair stated: "We ran for office as New Labour, and we will govern as New Labour." He lost no time in making his intentions clear. Labour right-winger Frank Field, who has for many years attacked the benefits system, was appointed minister for welfare reform. The head of BP, who is not an elected members of parliament, was appointed as a trade minister. Another wealthy businessman is to head a commission enquiring into a minimum wage. The government has repeated its intention not to raise income tax, not to repeal anti-union legislation, and not to take back into public ownership the utilities sold for peanuts by the Tories.

But there have been a few welcome reforms. Some of the more vicious aspects of immigration policy have been relaxed. The government has promised to end the sale of land mines, and local government will be restored in London.

Constitutional changes

In constitutional matters, there will be major changes, with the near-certainty of a Scottish Assembly, with tax-raising powers, within two years, and the likelihood of a Welsh Assembly. It is also likely that there will be a change in the electoral system in Britain, with a move to a more proportional system.

The Tory wipe-out in Scotland and Wales followed an election in which they attempted to play up fears of the future of the United Kingdom; they therefore have little legitimacy for strenuous opposition to these assemblies.

A further welcome result of the election is the large increase in women members of parliament. This is largely the result of a Labour policy (later banned by the courts) of reserving certain seats for women candidates. There are now more than 100 women on the Labour benches. This is still only a quarter of the party's MPs, but it represents a significant, positive change.

## What do the rich and famous expect from Blair?

On the whole, Labour offers more a change of style than of policy. Chancellor of the Exchequer (Finance Minister) Gordon Brown chose to wear a normal grey suit, rather than formal evening wear, when he addressed a meeting of bankers in the City of London.

Tony Blair has been welcomed across Europe as a less abrasive leader than his Tory predecessors. But many must have been alarmed to learn that he was briefed by Margaret Thatcher before the recent EU leaders' summit.

## ...and the rest of us?

Blair is mistaken if he believes that this massive rejection of the Tory party can be seen as positive support for his

"New Labour" project. Exit polls at the polling booths showed that 60% of first-time Labour voters favoured redistribution of wealth, while 75% opposed any further privatisation. And yet, these are precisely the policies which the Labour leadership has spent months promising "not" to follow. Millions of workers voted Labour despite, rather than because of, Blair's promise not to increase spending on education, the health service, pensions, welfare benefits, housing and public sector wages. The demand for change is strong, and it will not be long before this leads to a confrontation with the new government. Any attempt by the government to further cut welfare spending, or to impose a public sector pay freeze, in order to meet the convergence criteria for a single currency, will be strenuously opposed by a working class which has gained in confidence with the massive defeat of the Tories.

## Abdication to the bankers

The decision by Chancellor Brown to surrender control over interest rates to the Bank of England - in effect establishing an independent central bank - can be seen as a first step towards acceptance of a European central bank. It indicates that this government, like the Tories, is more concerned with combating the threat of inflation than controlling the bankers and creating jobs. Under the new system, the banks will find it much easier to sabotage any economic policies not in their interests.

Although their massive parliamentary majority of 179 seats should enable Labour to disregard attacks from the right, it is more likely to be used as a threat against any left wing MPs who break ranks and demand increased public spending.

## Left-wing MPs must start to work

Before the election, many left Labour MPs argued that it would be a mistake to rock the boat, and be accused of threatening the election strategy. This excuse no longer holds water. They must be challenged to fight Blair's programme, even if this leads to expulsion from the party.

If Blair acts against them, their strongest defence will be though linking up with party members and trade unionists in building a strong and campaigning left.

Activists have already planned a series of conferences over the next few months in order to discuss the way forward for the left. The first of these will be the conference of the Network of Socialist Campaign Groups, in London on 31 May, which will be attended by party and union activists and several left MPs. As well as discussing the way to fight in the wake of the election victory, this meeting will focus on the way to oppose proposed changes in the Labour Party constitution, which would virtually eliminate its democratic structures. Further conferences are planned by the Network of Socialist Alliances in Coventry in June, and the Welfare State Network in Liverpool in July.

Together with the successful Euromarches in Britain, and the forthcoming annual conferences of many trade unions, this will ensure that the real issues will not be ignored in the euphoria of the massive Tory defeat.

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[1] In Dudley (near Birmingham) Mark Atherton gained 4.5%. SLP candidate Harpal Brar, secretary of the Indian Workers Association, won 3.9% of the vote in Ealing Southall. The sitting MP, Piara Khabra, is also of south Asian origin. Other SLP candidates included Trevor Wongsam (1.4%

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in Manchester Gorton), Patrick Sikorski (1.1% in Hornsey & Wood Green) and Paul Davidson (1.4% in Sheffield Brightside).