

New Labour and Public Opinion

ONE OF the least convincing arguments put forward by those trying to justify Tony Blair's support for a US war on Iraq is that the Labour leader should be congratulated for acting on the basis of political principle. Instead of pragmatically tailoring his policy to the results of opinion polls and focus groups as he usually does, we are told, Blair is now standing up for what he believes is right, and is prepared to court popular disapproval in order to do so.

In reality, Blair has never subordinated his politics to the requirements of popularity. The decision to inflict PFI schemes and other forms of privatisation on the public services was hardly made in response to overwhelming demand from the British people. Blair hasn't imposed the Public Private Partnership on the Tube because he thinks this is what the majority of Londoners want. He didn't try and stitch up the mayoral election in the capital three years ago because he imagined this exhibition of control-freakery would win him friends.

Far from consisting of politically vacuous opportunists who simply bend with the prevailing wind, New Labour has its own hard ideological agenda. Essentially, this is to destroy Labour as the political organisation of the workers' movement and replace the Tories as the main party of capital. From that standpoint, opening up the public sector to private companies greedy for profits makes perfect sense, and the objections of those who use or provide public services are an irrelevance. Anyone who offers resistance to this programme, such as Ken Livingstone with his opposition to the PPP, has to be crushed, irrespective of the damage it does to Blair's standing with the electorate.

This is not to deny that there is a pragmatic aspect to New Labour. After all, for Blair to implement his project it is first of all necessary for him to get elected. Here the basic tactic is to squeeze the Tory Party on the right by occupying its political ground. This faces the Tories with an apparently insoluble dilemma. Should they endorse Blair's rightist policies, in which case they may become politically indistinguishable from New Labour? Or should they differentiate themselves from the government by moving even further rightwards, and possibly lose support by appearing too extreme? This dilemma sets the one-nation Tories against the hardline right-wingers, and presents the public with the image of a divided party that consequently lacks credibility as an alternative to New Labour.

Within this Blairite strategy, the role of opinion polls and focus groups is to identify those issues on which the Tories might be able to win a measure of public support by launching an attack on the government *from the right*. If it is found that Tory

criticism of the government for being "soft" on asylum seekers would play well with some voters, Blair's response is not to take a stand on principle, defend the rights of refugees, condemn the Tories for pandering to racism, and try to win politically backward sections of the electorate to a more progressive viewpoint. Quite the opposite – in an attempt to neutralise Tory criticism, the government brings in even harsher anti-asylum legislation while David Blunkett consciously adopts the language of Thatcher, with his disgraceful reference to schools being "swamped" by asylum seekers' children.

If, however, public opinion is to the *left* of the government, then the Blairites reason that this is of no consequence, since the Tories will be unable to make any political capital out of it. For example, during the firefighters' dispute nearly two-thirds of the electorate supported strike action, evidently recognising that the FBU had a good case and that the blame for provoking the conflict lay with the government. But the Tories failed to make any political gains from this, because it was of course impossible for them to support striking workers. In fact they attacked the government by demanding new legislation to ban strikes in essential services, a position even further removed from the popular mood than the government's was.

Over Iraq, some four-fifths of the electorate oppose war without a UN resolution that authorises military action. But the Tories, who back Bush even more uncritically than Blair does, are scarcely in a position to take advantage of this widespread anti-war sentiment. Blair therefore calculates that he can ride out the wave of popular discontent without sustaining any major political damage.

He could be in for an unpleasant surprise, for it is significant that in some recent opinion polls the Tories have been closing the gap with Labour. If there is an explanation for this, it may be that voters are disillusioned with Blair more because of the arrogance and deceit he has displayed over Iraq than because of his support for war as such. If so, it is quite possible that the beneficiaries of Blair's unpopularity over his pro-war stance may, ironically, be the no less pro-war Tory Party.

Hopefully, Blair's contempt for progressive opinion will prove to be his undoing in a more positive sense. The opposition that his stance on Iraq has generated among the ranks of the labour movement, and even within the hitherto supine Parliamentary Labour Party, makes his position as leader look increasingly fragile. To talk of regime change in the Labour Party may be running ahead of events, but there is no doubt that the New Labour project is finally beginning to break up.

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