

# Blair's Act of Uniformity

**Ken Coates MEP**  
**questions Tony Blair's**  
**Christian socialist**  
**credentials and his plans**  
**for the labour movement.**

**T**HE Blair "project" is about removing any socialist elements that may still remain in the Labour Party's intellectual framework. I don't just mean the constitution, but policy commitments like full employment. These socialist elements are to be replaced by an explicit support for the workings of the capitalist market and its consequences.

This fundamental shift is then presented as a new form of ethical socialism. In *The Blair Revelation*, we have taken to pieces the claimed components of that ethical socialism. We have shown that in every case the people who are "prayed in aid" as spiritual guides were very much more radical than Blair himself. This is true whether you take Archbishop Temple, who preached something rather more radical than the old Clause Four at the time when Sydney and Beatrice Webb were drafting their formulations, or John MacMurray, a Scottish theologian much under the influence of both official communists and Christian communists in the 1930s.

The outlook of those who advocate the Blair "project" contrasts unfavourably with the representatives of the earlier tradition in every respect. Some of the words and formulas may appear similar, but their meaning is radically different. An entirely new content has been put into the original forms.

Blair and his supporters have corrupted the idea of human self-development as the central moral or ethical aim of socialism. Marx opposed capitalism because it was incapable of allowing human beings to develop to their full potential. In arguing this he was drawing on a substantial philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle, via Kant and Hegel. Blair uses the words of this tradition without understanding their meaning. He takes the words from the people he names explicitly and also from the fact that some echo of them could be found in the writings of Liberal thinkers like the Victorian idealist T H Green, who did read Hegel and Kant.

But the central problem for Blair and his supporters is their attempt to square this ethical basis with their support for the capitalist market. Today, all Blair really

seems to have is a notion of discipline. His idea of "community" is associated with all kinds of unpleasant authoritarian notions — about curfews and so on — which really don't look at the kinds of shatteringly disintegrative forces which his much beloved market has brought to bear on working class communities all over the land.

In fact, without a critique of the market, all talk of community is empty. This has been known a long time. Remember Marx said, a long time ago, that the true anatomy of civil society is to be found in political economy. That idea was understood perfectly well by Blair's gurus, but not by Blair himself. The great virtue of John MacMurray was that he made a special study of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and understood better than many official Marxists what Marx was trying to say.

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Another aspect of all this is that much of what we are commenting on isn't Blair himself. It's what others write about him, or for him. And what he encourages them to write. What Blair actually presents is just a set of words that are supposed to have good effects. Their object is to encourage people to identify with Blair and to discourage anything that makes people recoil from him. Artistically performed — as they are — they can have a momentary effect, but the problem is that the next hour, or the next day, those configurations that made public opinion receptive to something turn everybody off.

The spin-doctor-driven moralism is backfiring like mad. If you want to find people who are concerned about mass unemployment, you are as likely to find them in the churches as you are in certain kinds of political party.

Many ministers in the main denominations are very much alive to the problem of unemployment. These are people who go out comforting the widows of jobless young men who have committed suicide or parents who have fallen into terrible poverty and can't provide for their children.

I have worked alongside such church-

men for a considerable number of years now because I try to get the churches together in order to influence the political argument in the European Community about unemployment. This is a constituency drawn by its experiences to become concerned. If somebody preaches to them a "line", they can smell a rat. Some of the things that are being promoted as Blair's Christian concerns don't ring true with concerned Christians.

The Cardinal of the Scottish Catholic church, for instance, has picked up on the hypocritical authoritarianism. He has criticised New Labour for "scapegoating" easy targets like winos and squeegee merchants while failing to denounce the economic and social forces that create poverty and unemployment. He has also picked on the fact that though Blair says he is against abortion, anti-abortion campaigns are not even given the right to have a stall at Labour conference.

I believe that it is right that the secular authority should not be dictated to by the churches on an issue of civil morality, and that we should listen to all the points of view. It is not right to say that we are only going to listen to one point of view. If you are convinced that you are right, you have no fear of the opposing argument and no need to censor your opponent.

The response of the spin-doctors to Cardinal Winning's criticism of New Labour for blaming the poor has been hysterical. They have talked all kinds of rubbish about the Cardinal needing to apologise to Blair, and therefore shown themselves to be suffering from a complete failure to understand what moves voters.

There are a hell of a lot of Catholic voters in Scotland who care deeply about unemployment and already sceptical of New Labour's commitment to devolution. They don't like the heavy squad being unleashed on their Cardinal. Cardinal Winning does not come across to me as a spokesman for deepest reaction and religious obscurantism. He is a champion of the poor and the unemployed from within the Catholic tradition. If he wants to meet Tony Blair to express his concerns, then Blair should meet him. All these demands that he has to first apologise to Blair are insane.

**A**N important aspect of *The Blair Revelation* is our challenge to the twisted history of the Labour Party

that is current in New Labour and makes up a central part of Mandelson and Liddle's book. Perhaps the key misunderstanding is the explanation of why the SDP split. All the arch-villains knew they were never going to make it into the leadership of the Party and felt uncomfortable with the Party's move to the left. But the essential question was that their own personal advance had been halted.

The idea that they represented a sensible stripe that didn't go along with Bennism is ridiculous. In the mid '70s they were only too willing to go along with things that are now labelled "Bennism." Roy Jenkins, for instance, even had a chapter on regional economic development written for one of his books by Stuart Holland, who was the author of the Alternative Economic Strategy and the originator of a lot of the ideas about planning agreements. Such ideas were supported right across the Party. To say otherwise is to reinvent history. That doesn't mean that the Alternative Economic Strategy was right — almost certainly, multinational capital had already developed beyond the national framework — but that is a different question. The SDP offered nothing distinctive till they got themselves into an alliance with the Liberals, which was exactly the same kind of project as Blair is going for now.

The real history of events leading up to the great reforming government of 1945 is also garbled. Mandelson and Liddle give great weight to the contribution of Hugh Dalton and Herbert Morrison — Mandelson's grandfather. But the really important contribution after the MacDonald split was made by Ernest Bevin. He held the party together when it was down to around 50 MPs and the Liberals were a serious threat. Bevin organised the trade union movement to sustain and solidify the Labour Party. He built the *Daily Herald* into a substantial political instrument with 2 million readers. He also learnt from Keynes, whereas Morrison knew nothing and Dalton wrote books on the economy which repeated the economic orthodoxy of the time, which is, of course, very similar to the orthodoxy today.

In fact, if Dalton had been put into the same position as MacDonald's Chancellor, Snowden, then he too would have proposed major cuts in public spending and attacks on the unemployed. Bevin, on the other hand, did understand what Keynes was saying. That's why Bevin was able to move the Labour Party towards the full employment policy during the war and after. When Blair says that the real architects of post-war Labour were Beveridge and Keynes, he is leaving out Bevin who gave Beveridge and Keynes a political

anchor in a social class — the working class — and in the labour movement.

I'm not saying that all we have to do is revive Keynes. But we can learn from part of that experience which is valid. You don't have to live with mass unemployment. We lived without it for 30 years, we can do again. Getting rid of mass unemployment is a prerequisite for an advance for the labour movement.

**W**HEN Morgan Phillips said that "the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marxism", that was hogwash, but the trade unions did owe an awful lot to Nonconformism. You could see the same kind of thing in Poland with Solidarnosc and the Catholic church, where it was the only organisational form that was not incorporated into the political establishment. People who were quite agnostic became Catholics because they were able to express themselves differently. In Britain, Nonconformism was exactly the same kind of thing. It allowed people to express themselves differently but within the religious framework.

The Church of England belonged to the government. The pulpit had the royal coat of arms hanging above it. You got the King's message there. It was like having only one television channel. Literacy and communication turned round the Church: what we got during the English revolution was an explosion of religious tolerance, including of spectacular "deviations" like the Ranters and the Diggers.

The English revolution was the point at which people suddenly won the freedom to express all their humanitarian longings. It's a very important moment in our history. After that the King was brought back and you had the Act of Uniformity which outlawed all this dissentient thinking. Executions, imprisonment, discrimination were all used. All that was about extirpating the notion that we are all equal in the sight of God, that God speaks equally to all of us and that there is nobody licensed to be a priest who can tell us what to do, and so on.

At the same time, they purged the Church. All the old clergymen who stuck to the relative freedom were thrown out and you had to sign the Act of Uniformity to go on being a priest. It doesn't take much to imagine Blair's Members of Parliament signing this awful Act of Uniformity — "New Labour, new life for Britain" — which was voted through the conference and got standing ovations for slush.

The idea is to outlaw the dissent which has made the labour movement

into a free movement. The leaders of New Labour are against working-class people getting together and discussing politics. They are against anybody thinking. They are against any idea that might lead to a challenge to the status quo.

We have all come well beyond the time when we had to think in theological terms, but our forebears did have to think in those terms. There was no other way you could express it. I have tried to draw out this point because we are at an historic juncture. If they get away with their new Act of Uniformity, it is something that is designed to finish the historically formed left in Britain. It is an attack not just on us, but on our ancestors and our progeny. After all, what choice will those who come after us have if the political system is closed down against us all? I don't think they can succeed, but I know what they are trying to do and that's why it is necessary to speak about it.

We must tell the truth and not fear for the consequences. There are too many people deluding themselves that after the election things will open up for the left. That will only happen if we speak the truth now, if we stay silent we will lose. What we are doing is challenging a very powerful political apparatus that has enormous patronage powers in parliament and links with the media. But challenge it we must. That's what we've tried to do in the book.

There is no future for Labour with Tony Blair as leader and with the disciplined and integrated apparatus he has around him in control. Blair wants to dilute the Labour Party into a grand coalition with Liberals and wet Tories that will administer some kind of technological quick-fix to capitalism. The fix won't work and the coalition won't hold, but in the meantime the structures of the labour movement could be broken to pieces.

We must try and stop it. But to do so, we must say it like it is. We must not pretend we can go on for a long time as the left wing of this monstrosity, or put forward the socialist case in New Labour-friendly terms. If the Labour Party is to be saved, Blair must be removed as leader. Of all the responses we've got to the book, the one that cheers me the most was from Christopher Hill, the Marxist historian of the English revolution. He sent us a wonderful letter saying it was a good book and then posing the question: "How do we get rid of this man?" That is, of course, the correct question. *Ken Coates was talking to Tom Rigby.*

*The Blair Revelation — Deliverance for Whom?* By Michael Barratt-Brown and Ken Coates MEP, Spokesman Books. £6.99