

The return of hope

IT IS 2 May 1997, the day after the voters buried the Tories in a landslide of popular revulsion and gave New Labour an enormous and unprecedented majority in Parliament. A large crowd is standing in bright sunshine in and around Downing Street and down a sizeable stretch of Whitehall, watching the comings and goings, hoping for a glimpse of the new Prime Minister.

Everyone is exuberant, enthusiastic, happy, like people celebrating victory in a long and terrible war. Or people from whom a great weight has been lifted.

Some — but only some — of it is orchestrated by New Labour apparatchiks — entrance to Downing Street is by ticket only, compliments of New Labour. But nobody could generate or artificially concoct this crowd and this mood.

Supporters of *Workers' Liberty* are there in Whitehall to make a small demonstration in support of the demand that the new government restore free trade unionism in Britain. They unfurl an improvised banner calling for free trade unions. A sizeable crowd gathers around them and an impromptu meeting is held. Most of the crowd is friendly — except for a few Blairite officials who are soon silenced — not at all antagonistic.

The *Workers' Liberty* people talk to them about the need for free trade unions, and for the restoration of the welfare state. They criticise the Peoples' Hero, Tony Blair, on trade union rights and the welfare state. Few take it amiss.

The crowd remains friendly. But not in agreement with the speakers. The dominant reaction is that they expect Blair to be better than his promises. Many of them don't seem to have paid too much attention to what Blair has actually been saying.

With them, as with vast numbers of people throughout the country, the weight of a hundred years of political tradition, of what "Labour" meant in politics for so long, outweigh the bleak "New Labour" message Blair spent most of the campaign spelling out. They hold still to the image of Labour that Blair and his group have been working so hard to banish from public memory.

Good humouredly, a number of them say: "Give him a chance." Give Blair a chance. Then one adds, to murmurs of assent from others: "And if you are right, then we'll see." Then we may do something about it?

All our reports suggest that the scenes in and around Downing Street on 2 May were representative of feeling throughout the country. Many "Old Labour" people who have no illusions in Blair share it, though they know they will have to fight Blair — immediately — to win free trade unions.

People who had long felt it in their bones, that after four general election victories, the sleazy and vicious Tories simply could not be beaten, feel a correspondingly intense surge of joy and relief now that they have been thoroughly beaten.

The death of the Tory government has given birth to hope, and released much pent up feeling. People want change. They expect change. They expect *better* from Blair and *Labour*.

They have put their own interpretation on Blair's rhetoric. They have picked up the notes of sincere hostility to the ruling Tories in New Labour speeches and woven them into their own fiercely anti-Tory tune. It is not Blair's tune.

They blame the Tories for doing to Britain things Blair has said explicitly he will not attempt to reverse. In an unfocused way, millions of people seem to want Blair to do what he spent much of the long election campaign telling them he would not do. Thus, an election which was democracy at rock bottom, where little of substance — except getting the Tories out — was put to the electorate, has produced a wild upsurge of hope and expectation — and attached it to the Tories' Blairite understudies!

The fall of the Tories has unleashed what is for the ruling class and the new government a dangerous mood of expectation.

Possibly that is the most important political fact in British life now. It is, as the *Guardian's* liberal columnist Hugo Young said on 2 May, the big contradiction facing the Blair government:

"Tony Blair had two objectives during this election. The first was to win, the second to minimise every expectation of what would happen then. Now he has got a totally unforeseen result. The strategy turns out to have produced a triumphant contradiction. Blair has given rise to massive hopes and dreams far exceeding what he promised in order to secure his victory. The voters have steamrolled over all his

hesitations, declaring for a landslide that's wholly at odds with what he can deliver."

Nobody has any reason to believe that Blair will prove untrue to his own nature and his own politics, and go on to satisfy the hopes of all those enthusiastic crowds celebrating the fall of the Tories. The release of hope is what is important here.

Those of us who *have* been paying attention to what Blair says and what he wants to do to the political labour movement may be in danger of missing the significance of what has happened. It is important that we do not miss it.

Hope is a commodity more precious than government promises, or, for that matter, government deeds. When those raised up now to unwarranted hope in the new government learn that they can't rely on Blair, they may carry that hope over into doing things for themselves and develop out of it a belief that it is possible for them to do things. A belief that many things, long thought impossible, really are possible now that the heavy tombstone of Tory rule has been shifted.

Hope will stimulate and liberate desire. Desire and hope will stimulate action.

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Ideas like the defence of the welfare state which fell on ground sterilised by despair can now begin to flourish.

Those who hated the Tories hated them *for reasons*. They want Labour to be the opposite — and in ways in which Blair cannot be the opposite of the Tories without abandoning the New Labour project. Thus on the day of the election an opinion poll reported that over 80% of habitual Labour voters are in favour of the redistribution of wealth, and 65% of “switchers” share this view.

What is really to be expected of Blair is indicated by his appointment of the crypto-Tory eccentric Frank Field as Social Security Minister. Amongst his other peculiar views, Field a few years back even floated the idea of lowering the minimum school leaving age. God knows what he will try to do.

The contradiction between mass hope for betterment and a government committed to bleak neo-Tory policies can prove tremendously fruitful for socialism.

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In the aftermath of the great Liberal landslide of 1906, the disappointment of popular hope — including hopes vested in the 40 Labour MPs then elected — helped produce a tremendous wave of industrial direct action within a couple of years.

In France, in 1936, the election of a “Popular Front” government that intended to do little for its supporters, triggered a semi-revolutionary general strike. The working class in one bound forced tremendous concessions from the bourgeoisie, and its state. History does not repeat itself, but unleashed hope does work wonders.

Much depends on what the socialists do. If socialists remain sourly unresponsive and “sectarian” towards the mood around them, they will achieve less than might well be achieved.

The fight for free trade unions can now be put on the agenda for every trade unionist in Britain. The expansion of the unions into the unorganised industries can be attempted.

The fight to restore the welfare state and the NHS can be put on a new footing. The Tories never had a mandate for what they did to the NHS. Even New Labour speakers in the election felt obliged to give half-promises to restore it. Will they?

Now the campaign for the NHS and the welfare state has a chance to go on the offensive, recalling what Labour seemed to say in the general election campaign.

Blair has put up Field to redesign the welfare system: that is not by any means, the end of the affair. The working-class will speak in the period ahead, as we have not spoken since the early '80s.

The mass feeling that burst out on 2 May, and after, was benign and complaisant and happily expectant. Other feeling is there too — pent up anger and indignation and hate at what the Tories have done.

An awful lot of workers in the Eighties, especially in the old coalfields and steel-making areas, felt the Tory heel on their necks, and knew helpless rage as they listened to the triumphant cackles of the yuppies and rip-off merchants and other opulent robbers who had what seemed for so long to be an unshakable grip on their lives. Hordes of young people had their lives blighted and their youth taken from them.

That anger expressed itself too on 1 May and some of it tapped into the joyful rejoicing of 2 May. It has not gone away. Hope will turn back into anger as the Blairites in office try to be the neo-Tories they insist that they are.

Millions of people want a life of human solidarity and mutual care. They hate the ethos of Toryism. What they want can only be achieved by socialism. They can learn to understand that in the period ahead.

Hope, the great fructifier, the precondition for everything else, came back to Britain like spring on May Day 1997!

Workers' Liberty

Incorporating Socialist Organiser



THE WORKING CLASS WILL RISE AGAIN!

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Design: Tom Rigby; Production: Joan Trevor;

Business Manager: Alan McArthur.

Published by Phoenix Press, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA;

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