

The legacy of the Tories

By Martin Thomas

TONY Blair is Prime Minister and the Tories have the look of a party in serious disarray, as New Labour inherits the achievements of the "Thatcher revolution". Achievements, such as the great council-house sell-off — which has yielded a torrent of dispossessions, and city streets full of homeless youths and old people. Achievements such as the Tories' other big crowd-pleaser, selling off utilities cut-price. That has dribbled into a sour pool of anger at the incompetence of the greedy rip-off bosses who were given the privatised companies to loot.

Tory claims that 'freeing the labour market' would bring prosperity are mocked by the dole queues. Their assault on 'nanny state' welfare has led to a different sort of 'nanny state': the rise in a regrowth of the domestic-servant class, which once seemed to have vanished with the Victorian era.

Where they promised less state influence we have a much stronger state. There is more bureaucracy than before they took office. Bureaucrats, not nurses, have multiplied under the Tory regime.

Hollow rhetoric most of it proved to be, their talk of greater freedom. Except for the freedom to sell and buy. All too real, however, is the destitution they have worked — on the NHS for example.

The New Labour government is willing to accept this legacy of the Tories, with changes here and there, and to go on with Tory policies. Blair says that Britain has, after 18 years of Tory rule, the least free trade unions in the Western world — and that is how he wants it to stay! How firm is Blair's hold on the working-class movement over which he looms as dictator?

The mass working-class opposition to the Tories is not Blairite. Opinion polls are unreliable, but the evidence accumulates. An exit poll, on the day of the election, showed that 90 per cent of habitual Labour voters and over 60 per cent of those who had switched their vote to Labour believe in wealth redistribution.

76 per cent believe that there is a 'class struggle' in Britain (in 1964, only 48% believed that). 75 per cent believe that the country is divided between 'haves' and 'have nots'. 87 per cent think that the gap between high and low incomes is too big. 70 per cent believe 'it is better to pay higher taxes and have better public services'. Only 23 per cent thought the Health Service was safe with the Tories. Counting out don't knows, those who want more trade-union

control in industry and socialist planning outnumber those who favour union-bashing and the free market.

Blair and his pink-Tory faction dominate the labour movement, and the opposition to the Tories, not by force of argument and conviction, but by standing on the heavy lid which the Tories had put on working-class hopes through years of defeat and vindictive anti-union laws.

But Blair's faction also know something of the anger under the lid. They fear a working-class revolt under a Labour government, and want to shield themselves against it. Their present ascendancy gives them a strong position to construct that shield, by cutting Labour's links to the working class; their fears of future revolt make them move fast. They do not want to be leaders of a party based on the working class, not in the present febrile condition of capitalism. As Blair told the *Financial Times*, they want: "A situation more like the Democrats and the Republicans in the US. People don't even question for a single moment that the Democrats are a pro-business party. They should not be asking that question about New Labour".

By voting Labour in the General Election, therefore, the working class has taken a step forward towards reasserting itself; but it has also given the Blairite axemen a leg up on to the platform from which they plan to chop off labour's political head. Already TUC general secretary John Monks talks of: "The relaunch of the TUC as an independent campaigning organisation... we have tried to build bridges to all the political parties".

If this political self-relegation by the trade unions becomes an enforced fact of the political structure, by the closing of the channels for working-class political representation and trade-union control in the Labour Party, then that will be a great defeat for the working class, as great as any the Tories have imposed.

The structure of British politics is in flux. Marxists will work to maximise and accelerate the political and economic self-assertion of the working class, in the first place by pressing for a workers' charter of trade union freedoms which would legislate the right to strike and picket effectively, and by campaigning to rebuild the Health Service and the welfare state.

When Stalinism seemed a going concern, we had many people who said they

were socialists with a small 's' but were really nothing of the sort. Today we have the converse: many working-class people, especially youth, are socialists but think they are not. Campaigns for the welfare state and for trade union rights can help them come to understand our socialism, working-class socialism, the socialism which Marx and Engels differentiated in the *Communist Manifesto* from all forms of 'reactionary' and 'bourgeois' socialism.

At the same time we must strive to mobilise those already in the labour movement to resist the Blairite axemen. To declare the battle already lost, and hive off now, would be foolish. New and better working-class representation will be created only from within the trade unions now affiliated to Labour, and not by one or another sect calling on the workers to rally round it.

The trade unions and Labour activists committed to working-class politics should form a new Labour Representation Committee.

Though present and future diverse resistance to aspects of capitalism generate a force that can offer a way out of this system where 'you can't buck the market', and unemployment hovers round a 'natural rate', it has to be rallied and threaded together by an organised group of Marxists with a generalised political perspective. We want to restore trade union rights, rebuild the welfare state, and win jobs, not welfare. We need a government to do that, a government which serves the working class as the Tories have served the bosses.

We will not get that from Blair. Therefore, we must rally forces in the labour movement for a mass working-class alternative to Blair. We must fight to reclaim the Labour Party for the working class, or, if Blair's control of the party machine prevents that, to create a new workers' party based on the trade unions. The aim of the workers' party must be to create a workers' government.

For 12 years now, since the defeat of the 1984-5 miners' strike, the main job of Marxists in Britain has been to keep the flag of working-class socialism flying against the hostile winds of bourgeois triumphalism.

Now the political situation is opening up. How rapid the revival will be, and how many setbacks it will encounter, we cannot tell: but the parameters have changed with the election of the Blair government.