

# President Blair and Democracy

On the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1998 Tony Blair came to the European Parliament in order to report on his work in the United Kingdom Presidency of the European Union.

Such sessions are marked by great diplomatic decorum. Even so, it was not difficult to discern important differences between the outgoing President of the Council, and the continuing President of the Commission. In a statement of resolute politeness, Jacques Santer made it transparently clear that there were substantial differences of focus and concern between the Commission and the outgoing Presidency.

I was not able to explore any of these areas, because I was allocated one and a half minutes in which to give my assessment of the British Presidency. This meant that it was necessary to speak in rather wide generalities, and so this is what I said:

*"I think the outgoing Presidency should be called the Blair Presidency, in honour of a very great and much-loved Englishman. I refer, of course, to Eric Blair, better known as George Orwell."*

*Orwell described how the Europe of 1984 was governed by a Ministry of Truth in which spin doctors explained how the war being organised by the Ministry of Peace was always going well. The language of this world was called 'newspeak'.*

*New Labour speaks this language to perfection. When they read of New Labour's measures against poverty, the poor hide their purses. When we hear of Britain's new leadership in Europe, we anticipate an orgy of xenophobia, tempered only by American advice.*

So it is fitting that the last achievement of the Blair Presidency was the annulment of the Poverty Four programme in the Courts, terminating a wide range of measures to help the homeless, shelter mistreated women, aid refugees, and repair wheelchairs for the disabled. I am glad Mr. Blair will now move to annul this annulment: this proves that public opinion in Europe still counts for something.

Now the outgoing President can return to his efforts to chart a third way, between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong.

Orwell has mapped it out for us. Along this third way, Europe will become more fragmented, vertically and horizontally. Art will be tongue-tied by Authority. And the Poor will explore the depths of an even greater misery. But, it must be admitted, as markets triumph, someone else might win much money."

Although my time had been very brief, I did not escape the chastisement of the Prime Minister, during his summing up. This is what he said:

*"I think that Mr. Coates said that the British Government was undemocratic. I would like to respond by saying that they were elected as Labour members of Parliament on a Labour ticket. They left the Labour Party. They still sit as Members of Parliament without any democratic mandate for doing so at all. That is not my idea of democracy."*

Of course it will be instantly apparent to anyone who looks at what I said that it did not charge the British Government with being undemocratic. As a matter of fact, I think there are some important ways in which the British Government remains undemocratic, some areas in which it has improved democratic possibilities, and some in which it has presided over deterioration. But my short speech was not about democracy at all, but about duplicity. It is noteworthy that the Prime Minister's courage deserted him when it came to responding to that charge, with which he must already be extremely familiar.

Naturally, the elaborate machinery of duplicity does impinge on our democratic rights. Systematic misinformation poisons the well of

decision making, whether the decision-makers be democrats or autocrats.

But Mr. Blair is a clear victim of his own propaganda when he says that Hugh Kerr and I “were elected as Labour Members of Parliament on a Labour ticket. They left the Labour Party”. In fact, we were thrown out on our ears, without the courtesy of any hearing, still less of any investigation or enquiry. Before our ejection, we had been unconstitutionally “suspended” from the European Parliamentary Labour Party, for declining to sign a Code of Conduct which had been unilaterally imposed by the Labour Party National Executive Committee. The complaint that the Code was a breach of Parliamentary Privilege was ignored. The European Parliamentary Labour Party was mobilised flat out to influence the deliberations of the European Parliament’s Rules Committee when we complained that the Code breached the Parliament’s Rule 2, concerning the “mandate” of Members of Parliament. I personally had been threatened in a series of newspaper articles reporting on leaks from unnamed sources in the Government, at intervals over more than a year. Towards the end, the leaks became more insistent, saying that the changes in the electoral law governing European elections were designed to get rid of myself and others from the list of Labour MEPs.

It seems to me that this involved the invention of a mighty steam hammer to crack a small nut: but if I were a private employee instead of an elected Parliamentarian, I would have been able to drag the Prime Minister and his accomplices before an industrial tribunal, on a charge of constructive dismissal, even before I was in fact dismissed. So much for having “left” the Labour Party.

But Mr. Blair goes on to say that I was elected as the Labour Member on a Labour ticket. Indeed I was. The ticket was drafted under the auspices of the late John Smith, and it had a great deal to say about full employment. It set out a strategy “which recognises that growth and full employment will only be achieved against a background of sustained investment in productive capacity, research and development, human skills and social and economic infrastructure”. It promises to work with our partners “to develop our co-ordinated strategy for recovery”. It rejects “the dogma of further labour market de-regulation”.

This manifesto, **MAKE EUROPE WORK FOR YOU**, was based in part on my own pamphlet, **A EUROPEAN RECOVERY PROGRAMME**.

John Smith had come to Strasbourg when he was seeking election, to discuss these issues with myself and a number of colleagues. We found ourselves in strong agreement, which is why from that time on I consistently supported the former Leader of the Leader Party. The Manifesto upon which I was elected is different in every particular from the work programme of the present New Labour administration. Far from opposing deregulation, the Blair administration preaches it. Far from campaigning for an increase in workers' entitlements, New Labour blocks them. Far from working for full employment, New Labour prioritises inflation, and sticks strictly to the dogma of NAIRU, the Non-accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment, which callously seeks to maintain unemployment at a level high enough to "squeeze out" inflation.

The Party of John Smith and the Party of Tony Blair are completely different on all these matters. So that if Tony Blair asks me where my democratic mandate is, I can tell him: it is in the Labour election Manifesto of the European Elections of 1994, which I continue to defend, and against which he has pledged the main forces of the New Labour administration.

To coin a phrase: "that is not my idea of democracy".

*Ken Coates*

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