

EDITORIAL

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## The Blair Legacy

**CLYDE CHITTY**

Whether we concentrate on foreign or domestic issues, the Blair legacy is a decidedly mixed one, and obviously open to a number of varying individual interpretations; that said, I feel able to state with some degree of confidence that much of it will *not* have earned the endorsement of *FORUM* readers and supporters.

An editorial which appeared in the *Observer* on 29 April 2007 listed some of the positive features of the past decade, thereby justifying the heading of the piece, which proclaimed, 'after 10 years, Blair has made Britain a better place'. According to the *Observer*, Blair's solid achievements included: the minimum wage; free nursery care; tens of thousands more teachers, doctors and nurses – with higher wages; the working families' tax credit; the right to increased maternity and paternity leave; a statutory right to flexible working hours; the Disability Rights Commission; the Freedom of Information Act; civil partnerships and the repeal of Section 28; the restoration of self-government for London; devolution for Scotland and Wales; the Human Rights Act; peace in Northern Ireland. In the view of the *Observer*, 'Mr Blair's Government has given millions of people unprecedented freedom to live as they choose and has also given them the wealth and security to do it'.

Yet there is a much bleaker side to the story of the Blair years. New Labour has shown itself to be as besotted with the rich and the successful as were the Conservative administrations which preceded it. Public sector workers have had their morale constantly undermined by a government that has insisted on portraying them as obstacles on the path to modernisation. In the Health Service, reforms have been confusing and often plain contradictory – first dismantling and then reinstating the internal market. Indeed, there are so many areas where New Labour has been determined to adopt and expand the Conservatives' privatising agenda. According to the staunch Blairite John Hutton, former Work and Pensions Secretary, speaking recently on the BBC Radio Four *Today* programme, Tony Blair's greatest achievement was in

ensuring that 'the marketisation of the public services is now built into the DNA of public service provision'.

Where education is concerned, there is remarkably little to applaud. Right from the outset, Blair's Government seemed determined to carry forward most of the Conservative Party's education agenda, even if some of the language used by ministers was calculated to hide the true extent of this seamless continuity. Back in 1999, I edited with John Dunford, now General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, a collection of essays entitled *State Schools: New Labour and the Conservative legacy*. We asked *Guardian* and *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* cartoonist Martin Rowson to provide a suitable drawing for the cover of the book, and he came up with a brilliant cartoon which seemed to neatly summarise the essential message of the book's contributors. A gowned and mortar-boarded head teacher (unmistakably Margaret Thatcher) is shown handing a prize to a beaming, blazered student (unmistakably Tony Blair). The prize is obviously a neat scroll of Mrs Thatcher's education policies.



At the end of June this year, former Education Secretary Estelle Morris wrote an extraordinarily blinkered and ill-informed article for *Education Guardian* (26 June 2007), with the headline 'Don't forget what Blair has achieved', in which she said she had no doubt that 'history will record Tony Blair's contribution to education as one of the most significant of any of our prime ministers'. She went on with a paean of praise to Blair's qualities and achievements:

his personal drive, commitment and leadership; the time he gave to education; the number of school visits he made and educationists he met – all this must be unmatched by any of his predecessors. ... He has always shown determination and skill in driving through the issues he thought were important, and he led a government that has delivered the biggest ever sustained increase in funding.

What Ms Morris failed to highlight in this articles was the *divisive* nature of Blair's education policies, with education being seen as a market commodity driven by consumer demands, and parental choice of schools being facilitated by greater teacher accountability and the publication of league tables of test and examination performance.

There can surely be no denying that Blair was a remarkable politician and actor with an ability (on *most* occasions) to convince a supine audience that *their* concerns were also *his*. With no roots in the Labour movement, he managed to survive for over a decade while actively disliking the party he was elected to lead in 1994. The adoption of the label 'New Labour' was no mere cosmetic tinkering; it represented a complete break with the values and principles that the Labour Party had once upheld. Those values could hardly have been described as truly radical or socialist; but there had been some sense of a collectivist vision and a commitment, however mealy-mouthed, to the idea of greater social equality and to the gradual amelioration of the worst excesses of free-market capitalism. Under Blair, the gap between the rich and the poor actually widened, with most ministers clinging to the belief, popular with all greedy entrepreneurs, that the prosperity of the few must eventually lead to the well-being of the many.

There are those – and I'm thinking here principally of *Guardian* columnists Jackie Ashley and Polly Toynbee, who are often viewed as Gordon Brown's representatives on earth – who have argued that everything would change for the better under the new Prime Minister. Yet there have so far been few positive signs of a radical break with the past and certainly, where education is concerned, there is little cause for optimism. Gordon Brown is no longer committed to a truly comprehensive system of secondary schools; and, in his final Mansion House Speech as Chancellor, he said he shared Blair's vision of securing 400 city academies by the year 2010. He also said that 'we need a renewed focus on setting by ability in key subjects as the norm in all our secondary schools'.

The Executive of the Campaign for State Education (CASE) has recently sent an open letter to Gordon Brown (see *CASE Notes*, Issue 20, July 2007) arguing that, in recent years, 'choice' has become a means of selection, 'diversity' a route to ethnic, religious and class segregation, and PFI (Private Finance Initiative) a means of privatisation of public assets involving a major loss of local accountability. CASE is particularly concerned about the expansion of the academies programme – the subject of a forthcoming special number of *FORUM* in the spring of 2008. In the words of the open letter, 'this

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programme, driven as it is by the inexplicable belief that religious zealots or unaccountable private corporations are more worthy custodians of a child's well-being than that child's own local community and the people they elect to run their local affairs, exemplifies much of the worst in state education today'.

I must admit I have little optimism that Gordon Brown will start listening to the views of progressive educationists; but that doesn't mean we must stop campaigning for a state education system that will benefit *all* our children.