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Reference Code: 2021/49/238

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Visit of the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Tony Blair, to
Dublin, 4/5 September, 1995.

Steering Note

Tony Blair and "new Labour"

Tony Blair's election as leader in July 1994 has involved the British Labour Party in significant moves towards the central ground of British politics and has brought about a strong improvement in Labour's electoral prospects.

The symbol of Tony Blair's approach is the revision of Clause Four of the party's constitution at a special conference in April - Clause Four had committed the party to pursuing the common ownership of the means of production. There has been a steep increase in Labour Party membership and a reduction is expected in the voting power of trade unions within the party. Blair's economic policy, articulated by Shadow Cabinet colleagues such as Gordon Brown and Jack Cunningham, focuses less on left/right issues than on the need for a skilled workforce, an adequate use of new technologies, and a constructive interaction with Europe. The Labour Party hopes to be recognised as the party of sound economic management and to present the Conservatives as allowing ideological considerations to distract them and as having been so long in office that the door is open to malpractice ("sleaze").

Over the past month, unease within the Labour Party at the process of "modernisation" has come to the surface. For example, left-wingers such as Dennis Canavan and George Galloway have criticised Blair's policies, Peter Hain has called for a better motivation of party workers, and even a traditional right-winger like Roy Hattersley has complained that Labour's policy on the "opting out" of schools is too close to that of the Conservatives (see below). There have been complaints that Labour's campaign against the Liberal Democrats in the recent Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election was too severe.

Tony Blair is ready to admit that the direction in which he is leading the party creates unease among left-wingers and traditionalists. But he argues that his opponents have become "too comfortable with life in Opposition" and that only a modernised Labour Party, competing for middle class support and middle ground opinion, can prevent the Conservatives from recording yet another General Election victory. Blair also argues that global trends reduce his freedom of manoeuvre on economic issues and that in many areas, such as constitutional reform, his policies are radical.

The latest MORI opinion poll, published in the Times on 31 August, gives Labour 56%, the Conservatives 25% and the Lib Dems 15%. Labour remains justifiably optimistic that the Blair strategy will pay off in the General Election.

The election must be held by April 1997. Although Major's Government now relies on a small majority which may fall further through by-elections, it is expected that the Conservatives will continue in office until relatively close to the cut-off date. We understand that Labour expects to be able to complete two more party conferences, in October 1995 and October 1996, before a General Election takes place.

The 1995 Party Conference

Blair's visit to Dublin precedes a very busy month for Labour, which includes the TUC conference in the week beginning 11 September and the party conference itself in the week beginning 1 October.

The intention of the party leadership is to use this year's party conference to develop policy in a number of areas. Documents will go to conference on the economy, health, and crime. There may be proposals from the Shadow Cabinet on education. Consideration is being given to a National Executive Committee statement on Europe.

At the same time, the left wing of the party may seek to challenge Blair's policies from the floor. One obvious area in which this may happen is that of the minimum wage. There are signs that the TUC conference may support a minimum wage of up to £4.15 an hour and seek to have this adopted as Labour Party policy. Blair and his Shadow Cabinet will oppose this on the grounds that the minimum wage should be defined by a Labour Government in office. Because of the strength of the block votes of the trade unions, a hard struggle over the minimum wage issue will also indirectly raise the question of the further reform of decision-making procedures in the party.

A second important left/right issue is that of education. Schools which "opt out" of local authority funding and control, and are funded by central government, are felt by Labour traditionalists (a) to receive excessively favourable financial treatment and (b) to undermine efforts at the local level to provide common educational services. The party leadership argues that equitable solutions can be found to these problems without removing the right of schools to opt out. One source of acrimony in the discussion is that Tony Blair has sent his own son to the London Oratory, a school which has "opted out" - although of course it is not a public, i.e., fee-paying, school.

Given Blair's success to date in imposing his stamp on the party, it seems likely that the party conference will - despite left-wing unease on particular subjects - represent a further step towards a new-look Labour policy.

The Shadow Cabinet elections in mid-October will give the party leader an opportunity to make changes at Shadow Cabinet level. An important development is that this Chief Whip is no longer to be elected directly but will be appointed by Blair from among the nineteen elected members of the Shadow Cabinet. However, a major upheaval is not expected. Mo Mowlam will, according to all indications, remain at her post.

Labour Party Policy on Northern Ireland

Formally speaking, Labour policy is represented by the National Executive Committee statement on Northern Ireland approved by the Labour Party conference last year. This statement preserves continuity with the policy developed in the 1980s, in that it includes a re-statement of Labour support for Irish unity by consent. As there is to be no special policy debate on Northern Ireland at this year's party conference, the NEC statement of October 1994 is likely to remain on paper as the party policy up to the next General Election.

At the same time, Tony Blair last October replaced the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Kevin McNamara, by the "moderniser" Mo Mowlam. Mowlam, unlike McNamara, was an elected as opposed to an appointed member of the Shadow Cabinet, and this was offered as the reason for the change. In reality, however, Mowlam's appointment represents a shift in priorities under Blair's leadership.

Blair has committed the Labour Party firmly to bi-partisanship on Northern Ireland. This is seen as serving the interests of the peace process, but also the Labour Party interest, both in electoral terms and in terms of preparing for a future Labour Government.

Blair's personal view is that criticism of Government policy by the Labour Opposition can be counter-productive and provoke the adoption of more entrenched positions. While he has offered to "use his influence" if the Irish Government sees a threat to the peace process, Blair clearly intends this influence to be used in the first instance behind the scenes - as happened once when John Smith was leader of the party.

We are told that Blair personally believes that Northern Ireland is a political asset for John Major. In party political terms, Labour's interest is to prevent Northern Ireland from becoming an election issue, to avoid taking positions on, e.g., prisoners and decommissioning which could be portrayed in an unfavourable light, and to gain credit for putting the public interest first by supporting the Conservative Government on the peace issue.

It is evident that Blair hopes that his cautious low profile on Northern Ireland will facilitate a future Labour Government in taking over, if necessary, the management of the peace process. Part of Mo Mowlam's brief is to maintain good relations with both Nationalists and Unionists.

Within the general context set by Blair, Mo Mowlam has emphasised her support for the Framework Document and for a "balanced constitutional settlement" and has been ready to go into considerably more detail on policy than Blair himself. In recent months she has been conducting a series of meetings with local councillors in the North in which she focuses on the opportunity now presented for economic regeneration.

Pressures on Blair's policy

A small number of Labour MPs - most notably Kate Hoey, who is from Belfast, and the left-winger, Harry Barnes - reject an analysis of the Northern Ireland situation based on the need to accommodate both Nationalists and Unionists through new institutions. This group favours a British Labour Party presence in Northern Ireland, an end to the sister relationship with the SDLP, and the integration of Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The interest of the small Loyalist parties in establishing left-wing credentials has been used as an argument in favour of a Labour presence in Northern Ireland, although ultimately the Labour Party and left-wing Unionists would be in competition.

Current indications are that the integrationist minority in the Parliamentary Labour Party poses no threat to the party leadership and will be unable to make a significant impact at the party conference in October. However, if any formal arrangement were to emerge between the SDLP and Sinn Féin, it is likely that the sister relationship between the SDLP and the Labour Party would come under pressure.

Blair's bi-partisan approach is also causing some unease within the mainstream left wing of the party (Harry Barnes is in the Trotskyist "Independent Labour Party" tradition). MPs such as Peter Hain, Dennis Canavan, Max Madden, and possibly Kevin McNamara, as well as those further to the left such as Tony Benn and Jeremy Corbyn, would be concerned that Labour's traditional commitment to Irish unity may be lost sight of. They would see this as symptomatic of the dangers of "modernisation" under Blair's leadership. By and large, the activists within the Backbench Committee on Northern Ireland (chaired by Canavan) would be sympathetic to this point of view.

Our impression is that the leadership has successfully diffused pressure from the left. Mo Mowlam, whose main emphasis is on the need for a "balanced constitutional

settlement"; has tried to show empathy with Nationalist concerns, for example, through a sympathetic attitude - behind the scenes - on prisons issues. Mowlam works closely with Clive Soley, who has been closely involved in the formulation of Labour policy on Ireland since his election to Parliament in 1979.

It seems that Soley and Kevin McNamara are the inspirers of a new Labour Party discussion/pressure group, the "Agreed Ireland Forum", which is to be launched at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton. One might expect the "Agreed Ireland Forum" to be strongly supportive of the Framework Document, including its all-Ireland dimension, while at the same time being ready to work closely with the Labour leadership.

Suggested approach

Opportunities may be found to make the following points to Mr. Blair and his entourage:

- * we appreciate Tony Blair's interest in Ireland and the fact that a visit to Ireland, North and South, has been one of his priorities;
- * Labour's policy has been constructive - its bi-partisanship, its support for the Framework Document, its willingness to listen to all sides;
- * we are appreciative of the efforts of those of Blair's colleagues who are in the front line on Irish issues, especially Mo Mowlam and her team and Clive Soley, the new Chairman of the Select Committee;
- * we appreciate Mr. Blair's and Dr. Mowlam's accessibility to the Embassy in London. The new Irish Ambassador looks forward very much to once again having Mr. Blair as a guest at the Embassy reception during the party conference. We hope that the Minister for Finance, Mr. Quinn, who will be addressing a fringe meeting in Brighton, will be attending the reception.

It would also seem appropriate to try to brief Blair on a number of specific aspects of the peace process:

- * the agenda for the summit on 6 September;
- * the hoped-for starting date for inclusive and substantive negotiations;
- * the importance we attach to confidence building measures, in particular, prisons' issues;

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- * our sense that the focus of attention is switching away from the "Washington principles" and that Blair should allow for this in his public comments, even granted a continuing spirit of bi-partisanship vis-a-vis the British Government.

Our impression in the past has been that Tony Blair has not focused on the detail of the Downing Street Declaration and the Framework Document, and in particular on the manner in which the concept of "self-determination" is used and its connection to future referenda both North and South. There may be an opportunity to tactfully clarify Blair's thinking on this point.

Finally, it should be noted that an indication of Blair's current thinking may emerge in an interview which is being given today to Frank Millar of the Irish Times for publication in the context of the Dublin visit.

Irish Embassy,
1 September, 1995.