

Rt Hon John Hutton MP

# **The impact of New Labour on British politics**

Speech delivered to the British Politics Society, Norway

University of Oslo, 16 February 2010

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# **The Impact of New Labour on British Politics**

**John Hutton**

**Oslo University, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

I would like to begin by thanking the University Politics Society for inviting me to speak to you today. In Britain we have always admired both the robustness of Norwegian politics and the strong democratic traditions that have prospered and developed in your country over many decades. I am greatly honoured to be here.

I have been asked to speak about the impact of New Labour on British politics over the last 15 years. In doing so I cannot claim to be wholly objective. I have worked all of my political life in the cause of social democracy and progressive politics. It has been the high point of my time in politics to have served in Government alongside Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. So I am not a neutral by-stander.

I have also been invited to say a few words about the future of British politics. This also will be difficult for a number of reasons. First, predicting the future is by definition not an exact science. And after all, a week can be a long time in politics. And second, I am reminded of something that JK Galbraith said in *A Life In Our Times* in 1981,

**“After a lifetime in public office, self-censorship becomes not only automatic but a part of one’s personality.”**

I’ll try and avoid this pitfall too.

My sense is that change is coming to the politics of my country. By that I am not referring to the outcome of the forthcoming general election because this too cannot be predicted with any great certainty at this point. I mean to the system itself, its institutions and yes its values. I want to come back to these themes in a few minutes.

But let me start my comments today with some remarks about the impact of New Labour. This can be assessed on a number of different levels. And these impacts can be both short term as well as long term. In trying to make judgements here it's always a good idea to proceed cautiously. Winston Churchill got it right when he said more than half a century ago

**“It is an error to believe that the world began when any particular party or statesman got into office. It has all been going on quite a long time.”**

So we should keep our feet on the ground. As politics is essentially a battle of competing ideas and philosophies, then perhaps this is the best place to begin any analysis of the impact of New Labour.

New Labour under Tony Blair's leadership, sought first and foremost to connect Labour's traditional values of social democracy to the realities of the modern world. For most of the previous two decades in Opposition we had been doing exactly the opposite. We changed our Party constitution in order to make it clear we did not believe any longer that the means of production, distribution and exchange should all be held in public ownership. We made clear our support for a market economy. These changes were designed to enable us to reach out to people who had never before considered voting for a party of the centre left. We did so not at the expense of our core values and beliefs, but by re-aligning ourselves with the expectations and aspirations of our modern society. So these changes were not cosmetic. They were profound and structural and helped Labour to become a Party of the mainstream again.

My argument today is not that New Labour somehow re-invented British politics. That would be a ridiculous claim to make because after all there is usually nothing new in politics. My argument instead is that New Labour has started to shift the centre of gravity of British politics.

And here we should start with the facts, although as we all know, in politics even the facts are always disputed. Mark Twain in a remark that must have been aimed at politicians astutely observed that you should;

**“establish your facts first and then you can distort them as much as you please.”**

This, at any rate, is my version of the facts about New Labour.

The last 15 years have been the most successful period in the history of the Labour Party. We have won three general elections in succession – something we have never done before in our history. Winning power and holding it for this length of time has allowed us to do many good things in Government. This in turn has helped millions of my fellow citizens to enjoy a safer, more secure life. Many of the people who have benefited from these policies were those who were largely excluded in the decades before, under Conservative Governments, from sharing in Britain’s rising national prosperity. As a result, we have made good progress in fulfilling our long standing objective as a party of the centre left of spreading opportunities more widely across our society.

Because of our actions in Government I believe that Britain is a fairer society today than it was 13 years ago. We have not put right every injustice. There are many issues that still need our attention – these range from inner city crime and deprivation to the standard of some of our public services. We have not reached the promised land. But we have marched towards it. The opportunity to make these gains would not have presented itself if we had not been New Labour. And in making these changes we enjoyed the strong support of the country itself. Britain wanted to change and New Labour was the agent of that change.

In implementing these reforms – a new national minimum wage, well funded public services, progress in tackling poverty and disadvantage at home and

overseas – I believe we have begun to turn the tide of political opinion in Britain.

Politicians of all persuasions always draw comfort when their political opponents are forced to change direction. This is certainly true for all of us in the Labour Party, as the boot has often been on the other foot. In Britain, you can feel that the underlying public mood has changed. Our politics have become more centrist. The old, un-reconstructed ideologists of both the left and the right sound increasingly ridiculous and out of touch. Politicians who espouse this kind of politics will get pretty short shrift from the electorate. I welcome this change of mood. And here lies what is perhaps New Labour's greatest achievement. Our political opponents now claim to believe in the same things we do. A new consensus is emerging. A consensus built on progressive foundations.

The scale and depth of the current recession is bound to test the depth of this new political consensus that I believe New Labour has helped to create. Only the passage of time will tell how durable this political settlement will ultimately prove to be. The Conservatives have only been able to prosper in recent times by claiming to support most of the changes that New Labour has made to Britain. To recover lost support, they had to try and move onto the new centre ground that we had fashioned. Today there are signs that the Conservatives may be changing their minds again.

Some in the Conservative Party certainly believe that the current economic problems we are facing can be used as a justification for a return to old fashioned Thatcherism. In their hearts many of them believe this would be the right thing to do. To deliberately reduce the role of the state and cut public services as an ideological statement. To turn their backs again on the EU and start again the endless and sterile warfare between a Eurosceptic Conservative Party and the rest of Europe. It would be an enormous mistake to go down this road again.

I hope there will be no going back to the old doctrinaire politics. It is true there is a danger of fringe parties on both the extreme left and right gaining some traction as the mainstream parties come closer together. But this will not challenge the fundamental new shape and direction of our politics because these parties command the support of only a tiny fraction of the population. And if Britain does decide to change its electoral system next year, and move towards an alternative vote in parliamentary elections then there is no prospect of these parties gaining any representation in the House of Commons.

This change in our politics is the consequence of successive New Labour election victories. These victories did not happen by accident. They were not just the by-product of our opponent's unpopularity. We won these elections by design. We won them because we were New Labour. At heart, we recognised aspiration as a natural human sentiment and that Government itself should always aspire to help people enjoy a better standard of living, to get on in life.

The desire of parents for example, to ensure their children have the opportunity to do more and greater things with their lives than they did can be the most powerful political force for good in any society. That is what we offered the British people in each of these elections. And they responded to that message in an unprecedented demonstration of support for us. This is what our political main opponents have had to respond to. Their conversion to the new centre ground has been a reluctant one and has taken a long time to engineer. And it might be faltering as we approach the next general election. But the political arithmetic is unequivocal. One election victory can easily be explained away. Three successive victories cannot. There are always choices to be made in politics. The Conservatives can be part of this new consensus or they can decide to remain outside it. It's their call.

Aspiration is of course, about more than just personal well-being. People have aspirations for their community, their neighbourhood, their country. Progressive politics has to encompass all of these ideas too. New Labour did so. We were not afraid to talk about getting tough on crime and tough on the

causes of crime. We are proud of our country and its traditions. Britain is a great country. We believe in some great things. Britons want to play a positive role in the world, fighting poverty and injustice wherever it shows its face. New Labour re-discovered the language that allowed all of these ideas to be given expression within a new progressive context. This completely eclipsed the simple, crude nationalism and isolationism of the old right wing of the Conservative Party who falsely believed that they enjoyed exclusive rights to our nation's flag.

New Labour represented a renaissance, a re-invention, of progressive politics in Britain. It was not a philosophy that simply tried to split the difference between left and right. It was not triangulation. Our progressive politics drew on a solid foundation of progressive values and principles and applied these to the world as it is today. We finally managed, at last, to put aside the moth-eaten Marxist text books of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The answers to the problems we face today will not be found there.

New Labour itself was born out of the disasters my Party experienced in the 1970s and 1980's. In Opposition, we struggled to come to terms with the modern world. We took refuge in the comfort of our political ideology rather than address the real concerns of most people in Britain. We talked an obscure language few people could understand. And rather than change our approach (which would have been the logical thing to do) we blamed the electorate for not voting for us, when in truth, they were right not to. I would often hear people say to me that we didn't understand their concerns anymore. We mistook aspiration for greed. We believed that profit was somehow inherently anti-social. We believed in punitive taxation for those who had been successful in their careers. In short, we became a parody of what a modern progressive social democratic party should be.

Today the world economy is more globalised. More open. More inter-dependent. More affluent. In the developing world poverty is in retreat. More children are going to school and getting access to healthcare. The world has changed and there will be no going back. The big challenges we face in this

new century – climate change, sustainable development, energy security, mass migration, international terrorism – can only be addressed if we act as a global community. If we act together. We cannot deal with these big issues on our own.

In Britain over the last 13 years our economic policies reflected these modern conditions. We aimed for low taxation. We supported open markets, enterprise and competition in order to support a dynamic, wealth creating private sector. As a result unemployment fell sharply. More new businesses were started. This allowed us to invest in the vital public services that helped spread opportunities and tackle social deprivation. More young people for example than ever before now go to university. Our progressive values never wavered. Tolerance. Fairness. Compassion. These are the values of strong societies – not weak ones as those on the right of politics have frequently tried to claim. In the words of John F Kennedy half a century ago, as he assumed the Presidency of the United States,

**“If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”**

These words reflect the enduring hopes and beliefs of all progressive politicians down through the generations. But politicians need power to put these values into operations. Winning and retaining power gave us the chance to implement these progressive values rather than simply talk about them – something that had been Labour’s more familiar role in British politics.

Parties of the European centre left should, in my view, strive to reflect these new economic realities in their own politics if they want to occupy positions of influence across our continent. We run the danger of becoming marginalised and irrelevant if we prefer to take comfort in the certainties of the past rather than embrace the real opportunities of globalisation. I want to see progressive parties of the centre left in Europe shaping the next decade and not just providing a running commentary on the mistakes our political opponents are making.



But just as globalisation has many benefits, when something goes wrong its consequences can be magnified and felt right across the world, creating new political pressures that have to be managed. The current economic crisis has shaken the new global economy to its foundations. In the West we have avoided economic catastrophe by taking action to support the banking sector. The scale of this financial support has been unprecedented and has severely damaged the public finances of many European countries, mine included. The scale and depth of the present economic crisis will require both of the main political parties in Britain to reduce public spending in order to ensure the recovery is not threatened by higher interest rates. But I sense that here too, our political opponents would not dare challenge the fundamental assumption that the quality of public services must nonetheless be preserved – because this is one of the best ways to spread opportunity and fairness more widely as well as providing essential support to the wealth creating private sector. Helping to build long term sustainable growth. In Britain today, all of the main parties would I hope subscribe to the New Labour argument that a strong society with good public services and a successful economy are not contradictions in terms but in truth, two sides of the same coin.

So my starting point today is not one of criticism of New Labour. It is one of praise. I am willing to concede that we have made mistakes in the design and implementation of some of our reforms along the way, - all Governments do. But we must be careful to avoid reaching the wrong conclusion from these failures. If my Party is to go on being successful in the future it must therefore remain a Party of New Labour principles and values. We must always seek to govern as New Labour. The national interest must always come before narrow sectarian advantage. There is no electoral future for my Party in British politics if we drift to a more ideological, left wing position.

This is what some political commentators believe will happen if the Labour Government is defeated at the general election. Some think such a defeat would mark the end of New Labour. My own view is that the Labour Party is less ideologically riven today than at any time in its history. Gordon Brown will

campaign firmly under the New Labour banner in the forthcoming general election, championing the needs of the aspirational mainstream. Our ambition is to maintain the broad coalition of support that has seen us to victory in previous campaigns – a coalition that includes people from all social classes who want their country to prosper and their society to be strong and fair. I believe there is a strong consensus within the Party that we should strive to maintain this broad coalition. The roots go deep and will endure – whatever the outcome of the election itself.

The important thing to remember in all of this is that New Labour is not a collection of fixed policies and neither is it merely a reflection of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's personal political preferences. Labour itself has changed. Many commentators have simply failed to understand this. Not everyone with the Labour Party shares these New Labour perspectives – that is obviously true. There are differences of opinion amongst us. But I know where the instinct and impulse of Labour lies and it is not in a return to sectarian politics.

Our New Labour policies will certainly need to change over time – they have to if we are going to remain in touch with the concerns of the people. But they will continue to be driven by our view of the modern world and the need to keep pace with people's aspirations. The values of New Labour will endure.

So my argument today is that New Labour has made a profound impact on political life in Britain over the last 15 years. We have helped create a new centre ground. This will help Britain to better meet the challenges it faces in the years ahead.

Our opponents have sometimes made the mistake of believing that New Labour was a triumph of style over substance. The truth is we did improve our style – we needed to if people were going to listen to us again. But in politics, if you have nothing to sell it won't matter how good your presentation is. First and foremost, New Labour presented a solid base of policy and ideas for the future which were grounded in a solid core of progressive values. These

conveyed a sense of direction, of purpose, for the country as a whole as well as for families and individuals. To be successful we must continue to do so. After all it is values that matter most in politics.

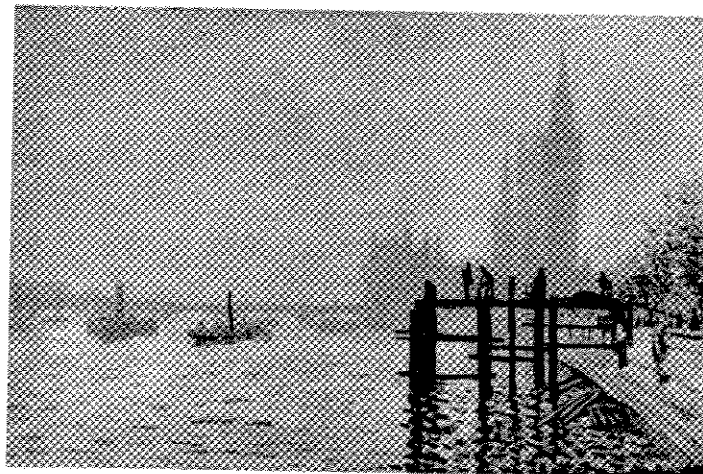
We must apply this approach to meeting the new challenges we all face today.

Finally, I want to say just a few words about the longer term.

Democracy is by definition, always unfinished business. Our unwritten constitution has changed a great deal since 1997. The British state has become more much de-centralised. Our voting system for regional and European elections has adopted more of a proportional dimension. We have a new framework of law that protects individual human rights. There are also new laws governing freedom of information which is now beginning to open up the whole system of government to greater public scrutiny. And change has rightly come to parliament itself with reforms to remove the hereditary principle from the Upper House. A referendum on wider voting reform may well be held next year which would herald much more profound changes to our politics. I do not believe any of these changes to our political system would have happened if a Conservative Government had been in office over the last 13 years.

These reforms have created important new checks and balances within our system. In Britain, Government is gradually becoming a much more constrained undertaking and our politics much less deferential. All of the political parties at home must learn to come to terms with these changes, and to reflect this in the way they conduct their own discourse with the people of Britain.

If we can do this then I hope our politics will continue to inspire a faith in democracy around the world. That is something all of my fellow Britons would take great pride in doing.



## British Politics Society Norway

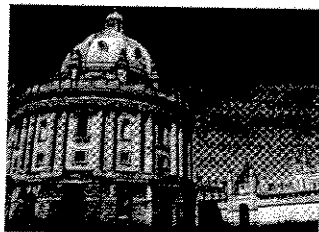
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**BRITISH POLITICS REVIEW**  
*Journal of the British Politics Society, Norway*  
Volume 8, 2016, 1-4, Autumn 2016



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CONTRIBUTORS  
Robert Leach • David J. Richardson • Jeanette E. Berger • Christina Hill  
Alan Scaife • Sarah Street • Gwera Brooking

**BRITISH POLITICS REVIEW**  
*Journal of the British Politics Society, Norway*  
Volume 8, 2016, 1-4, Autumn 2016



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Man and mystery

CONTRIBUTORS  
John Cadogan • Maria Odier • Richard Overy • Robert Mottson  
Richard Tyle • Gill Roberts • Kristin M. Hogrefe • Ann E. Isaie