

Labour's Pain . . .

And Blair's achievement.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

Brighton
THE LABOUR PARTY'S activist delegates descended on this channelside town for their first annual conference since Tony Blair led them to their unprecedented third straight electoral triumph in May. In the great tradition of the party, its leaders found a bastion of privilege to assault, but a bastion that only a few short years ago they would have chosen to strengthen rather than weaken—the trade unions.

Gone are the days when the unions dictated policy to the parliamentary Labour party. Led by Blair, the government refused to accede to the unions' demands that Margaret Thatcher's laws prohibiting sympathy strikes ("solidarity actions," in the union jargon) be repealed, and that other measures to make it easier for the trade unions to disrupt the economy be adopted. Both the prime minister and Gordon Brown, chancellor and successor-in-waiting (and waiting and waiting, with mounting annoyance) told the unions that there is no turning back from the labor-market reforms that have allowed Britain to maintain one of the most successful economies in Europe. "Not for us the malaise of France or the angst of Germany," Blair, now serving as president of the European Union but apparently unafraid to antagonize two of its largest members, told an appreciative audience.

As in other matters, so with the unions—the prime minister was taking a risky stand to prevent the

unions from regaining their historic stranglehold on the economy, and from scuppering his plans to reform the public services. After all, the trade unions still control about half the votes at party conferences, and provide the Labour party with about 40 percent of its funds and the majority of the foot soldiers it needs for the door-to-door canvassing that is so crucial in a country in which campaign spending and television advertising are strictly limited.

To students of social democratic history in Europe, this was only one of several striking changes from the days when Labour nationalized the coal, steel, airline, oil, and other industries in an effort to control the commanding heights of the economy. Blair told the delegates that he would continue reforming the public services so that parents can choose from a menu of specialized schools the one best suited to the needs of their children, and would "break down the old monolith" that is the state-operated National Health Service and "bring in new providers, allow patients choice" of doctors and hospitals.

True, he plans to confine choice to public-sector schools. But the very idea of choice is radical stuff in Britain where the consumer has not in the past been considered king. So Blair poured this New Labour wine from some Old Labour bottles. "If you've the money, you buy better [education and health care]. That is an affront to every progressive value we believe in. . . . Choice is what wealthy people have exercised for centuries. . . . Choice is too important to be a monopoly of the wealthy." The delegates loved this call to egalitarianism; the trade unions, representing workers in the

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health service and the schools, hated it. Choice would mean the closing of badly performing schools, and allowing patients to make appointments at times of their convenience, rather than sitting for hours in waiting rooms while hospital staff read the days' sports and gossip columns, or try to cope with the paperwork that is the inevitable consequence of central control of a workforce as large as the Chinese army.

So I was watching the most successful leader of a left-of-center party in Europe promising his members that he would fight for flexible labor markets and consumer choice. True, the labor market will remain burdened with procedures that make it more difficult to discharge employees than it is in the United States, and with the costs of such schemes as extended paternal leave and what Blair called "a new frontier of the welfare state, affordable, wrap-around child care between the hours of 8 A.M. and 6 P.M. for all who need it." But in pre-Blair days these reforms weren't even on the table; now they are part of the platform of the Labour party. The rest of Europe, with twice the unemployment levels of Great Britain, is beginning to concede that Blair, who styled himself a "change-maker," may be on to something.

It took some courage for Blair to promise a new, modern welfare state that has as its primary goal catering to the users of the public services rather than to the unionized providers of those services. After all, many of the delegates continue to address each other as "comrades," loyally clutch their copies of the *Guardian*, and cluck approvingly at that left-wing paper's assault on the prime minister for what they see as his abandonment of his party's values. The sponsored booths surrounding the convention hall included those of the "Cuba Solidarity Campaign," signing people up for tours to "provide solidarity and support for the Cuban people." And an Anti-Apathy group announced that it had sold out its supply of trainers

(sneakers, to us) made from recycled textiles. (The "Escape" line of sneakers is recycled from such items as prison blankets; the "Jack" line from "pre-loved men's suits.")

But when it came to the domestic front, Blair was engaging in a mopping-up operation in a war he has won—with some setbacks, and not completely—after eight years in office. His real profile in courage came when discussing Iraq and Britain's relations with America.

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tributed to the reduction of Labour's parliamentary majority in the recent election. Blair acknowledged this opposition: "I know there are people, good people, who disagreed with the decision to remove Saddam by force." And he concedes that "as a result of the fighting, innocent people tragically die."

But then came three sentences, each of which was followed by applause that, if it cannot be called wild, was more than polite:

But 8 and a half million Iraqis showed which future they wanted when they came out and voted in January's elections.

And the way to stop the innocent dying is not to retreat, to withdraw, to hand these people over to the mercy of religious fanatics or relics of Saddam, but to stand up for their right to decide their government in the same democratic way the British people do. . . .

Strip away their fake claims of grievance and see them for what they are: terrorists who use 21st century technology to fight a pre-medieval religious war that is utterly alien to the future of mankind.

In short, the prime minister used the communication skills with which Americans became familiar during his visits to New York, Washington, Camp David, and Crawford to persuade a skeptical audience that the British people, proud of their historic opposition to tyranny, are again living in an age in which Britain must "fight behind the standard of democracy," whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, or Sierra Leone. "For all the pain it can bring," he said, Britain must be at the front in that battle for democracy. That is the "progressive cause."

It was when Blair turned to the defense of his partnership with America that the delegates sat on their hands. It is difficult to do justice to the speech by paraphrasing, so permit me a slightly extended direct quotation:

Britain should . . . remain the strongest ally of the United States. I know there's a bit of us that would like me to do a Hugh Grant in *Love Actually* and tell America where to get off. But the difference between a good film and real life is that in real life there's the next day, the next year, the next lifetime to contemplate the ruinous consequences of easy applause. I never doubted after September 11th that our place was alongside America and I don't doubt it now. And for a very simple reason. Terrorism struck most dramatically in New York but it was aimed then, and is aimed now, at us all, at our way of life. This is a global struggle.

After the delegates had left the hall I chatted with a former minister in the Blair government and pointed out that the delegates had cheered when the prime minister urged them to "remain strong partners in Europe"—you know, the Europe

Blair had mocked a few minutes earlier for suffering from "malaise" and "angst"—but when he called upon them to support him in remaining America's strongest ally, the silence was deafening. "Don't be so gloomy," he responded, "they didn't boo." Thank Blair for small favors. And for his willingness to attempt, once again, to convince an audience, made skeptical by its opposition to Iraq and its fear and loathing of George W. Bush, of the importance of the U.S.-U.K. special relationship.

I have attended every annual conference since Blair took control of the Labour party. I have watched him face down the party's vocal and powerful left and shed the famous and beloved Clause IV of his party's constitution, drafted by Sidney Webb in 1918 and pledging "to secure for the workers by hand or by brain . . . the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange." I have seen him develop and lay out the doctrines of preemption, intervention, and regime change in the case of genocidal regimes, while Bush was still governor of Texas and the neoconservatives mere out-of-power scribblers. And I have seen him leave a trade union conference in mid-session and head directly for the United States after September 11, and then stand with President Bush in a coalition of the willing when France and an anti-American, Saddam-purchased clique paralyzed the United Nations.

And last week I saw him once again defy his party and much of the electorate to reiterate his resolve to stay with us in waging war on terrorism, in the firm belief that helping to spread democracy is what he likes to call "the right thing," and that the spread of democracy is our ultimate defense against Islamic terrorism. That's what he told his party last week, as they gathered on the shores of the Channel, across which some of them, and some of their parents, had traveled to unseat another tyrant who threatened their way of life. ♦