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New labour, new Britain

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IF George Orwell had witnessed the arrival of the 'New' Labour government in Britain, then he would not have had to write *My Country Right or Left*. For Tony Blair's Labour government transcends both left and right. In Blair's phrase, it is the politics of the 'radical centre'. It's a political concept which believes there is no longer a political left or right. Blair's clever ideological brigandage sees the transcendence of old dogma and its replacement by 'radical' measures in pursuit of both economic efficiency and greater social justice. Examples of Blairism: the rewriting of clause 4 in the party constitution to incorporate a commitment to the free enterprise, the adoption of a centrist (some read it as a rightist) economic programme and the progressive marginalisation of the trade unions.

His critics call it 'pick-and-mix politics'. Student voices say his government is neither 'New' nor 'Labour'. Purists and pedants might accuse him of heresy. Whichever way one looks at it, one cannot but admire Blair for his hard-headed realism in pursuing what the New Labour party has identified as its most urgent task: the modernisation of Britain.

It is this realism that sees Blair embracing much of the economic pillar of the right: the free markets and the recognition that the country is now on firm neo-liberal economic ground. The very realism that recognises it is already living in a globalised world rather than one in which it can choose how globalised it wishes to be. The New Labour government knows that globalisation means the acceptance of the outside world in every area of the political and economic spheres - perhaps, arguably more than that demonstrated by the previous government. With the new government, Euroscepticism may well be a thing of the past and Britain may no longer be chided as a laggard in the European Union intergovernmental talks. Blair has recognised the need to extend open dialogue with groups and institutions which traditionally were assumed to be outside the Labour realm, mainly business and corporate leaders. But how much commercial interests will play a central role in the government's foreign policy remains to be seen. Robin Cook, the new foreign secretary, has delivered a mission statement that promises to see Britain as a leading player - not a laggard - in the global arena. The strong doses of morality intoned in his statement may worry some political observers. But with Sir John Coles, the experienced head of the diplomatic service, in the background, it seems unlikely that Cook will bulldoze his way to deliver grandiose manifesto plans at the expense of national interests.

It is unlikely that the 'Blair revolution' will see the country making diplomatic gaffes, rather it will attempt to put the 'Great' back into Britain - not by restoring past imperialistic glories but by carving a significant role in global affairs. Malaysia's already cordial bilateral relationship with Britain is expected to be strengthened by greater mutually rewarding trade and investment opportunities. Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent meeting with Blair at Downing Street is widely seen as support for, if not an endorsement of, Blair's leadership. How much of Blair's dynamism will spill into British foreign policy remains to be seen at this point. But several observers like what they see so far - A Brit without the British sang-froid and effortless superiority. Blair's reconciliation to the liberal economic agenda, the puncturing of leftist beliefs and the straining to transcend leftist labels are

developments that go farther than just tackling a parochially British interest. Britain was the first country in the world to experience the industrial revolution and the first to have a working class majority. It is the country that provided the major empirical background for the works of Marx and Engels. It is also in Britain that the collapse of the old manufacturing industries in the post-1973 recession - a trend evident in the capitalist West - has gone furthest. It is from Britain that the world will learn what happens to a major industrial country which undergoes de-industrialisation and how its mature working class would react. Seen in this context, the British Left (as represented by Blair's Labour Party) has a global significance which the British Conservatism lacks. Blairism may well turn out to be a particularly instructive viable political alternative.

Perhaps Blair owes his striking electorate success simply to the fact that he echoed what the man in the street was saying about the country's economic disparity and other populist issues. Britain is, after all, the land that dreams the dream of King Arthur. And the ancient belief is that, if things turn bad enough, then the shade of Mallory's hero would somehow arise in modern form and by dint of his dramatic leadership, would restore the realm of Logres. It is a myth strengthened by the feeling that the spirit had awakened in 1940, assuming the form of Churchill. Is Blair the next hero?

The next five years will tell. Deeds, not words nor personal traits, are the acid test. Government itself will be the test of how far Blair and his coterie can cleave to the new politics and how far it takes refuge in old nostrums. Blair once told his party that the New Labour will be more radical in office than in opposition. Hardly a month in office, things have moved - radically so, as demonstrated by the Bank of England's newly acquired independence. Perhaps the age of Blairism has really begun.

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