

A STUDY ON TONY BLAIR'S FIRST TERM AS THE UNITED KINGDOM'S PRIME MINISTER

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ABSTRACT:

This paper mainly explains Tony Blair's Labour Government's policies towards the European Union during his first term of premiership. After the UK's membership in the EU in 1973, it had not actively engaged in the European Union's policies and implementation process. From 1973 to 1996, the successive UK Prime Ministers followed a negative and sceptical attitude towards various EU policy initiatives, and none of the UK Prime Ministers showed any special interest in improving their relations with the EU. In this context, the study of Tony Blair's first term of premiership plays an important role in understanding UK-EU relations from 1997 to 2001. In reality, Tony Blair's Labour government made a huge difference in the EU-UK relationship. His Labour government, from the very beginning, made clear to the UK citizens that their government would take a more proactive and constructive role in the EU policy-making and various developmental programmes. In this context, the study of Tony Blair's Labour government's policies and perspectives towards the European Union gives a better understanding of the United Kingdom and the European Union's relations, policies and perspectives during that period.

Keywords: European Union, United Kingdom, EMU, Single market, CAP, Single Currency, Social chapter

INTRODUCTION

The Labour Party under Tony Blair came to power in the UK after the 1997 UK General Election. The Labour Party, in its 1997 General Election manifesto, introduced pro-European policy goals, and these were wholeheartedly supported by the UK electorate in the election. As a result, the Labour Party won the election by a huge majority of votes in its party history. The 1997 election gave a new direction to the UK's EU policy. Tony Blair's pro-European policy initiatives made a huge change in the EU-UK relations. The crux of the policy was to establish some kind of British 'Leadership' within the EU. The policy of the Labour government of Tony Blair towards EU modernisation and change. It was making a break from the policies of the UK in the recent past, notably its 1983 manifesto of withdrawal from the European Communities, state intervention in the economy and nuclear disarmament. The Tony Blair government succeeded in placing a British imprint upon the EU, but continued as a non-member of the Euro, which in a way restricted its aspirations to play a leadership role in the EU.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The proposed research will focus on the United Kingdom and the European Union's relations during Tony Blair's first term of premiership. Stress here is on the UK's policy towards the EU during Tony Blair's period. Secondly, the study aims to understand Tony Blair's foreign policy in the context of the EU and does not deal exclusively with the EU's foreign policy.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In light of the above, the proposed research aims to understand the following:

- To understand the reason behind Tony Blair's involvement in the EU during his first term of premiership.
- To analyze as to what extent UK differs from other EU member states in EU Politics.
- Internal debate in the EU regarding Tony Blair's role in various policies.
- Impact of Tony Blair's policies on the EU and its wider ramifications.

HYPOTHESIS

- 1) Tony Blair sought to change the role of the UK in the EU. Unlike his predecessor, he brought about a pro-EU image of the UK.
- 2) Tony Blair also sought to maintain continuity in the UK's policy towards the EU. In core areas, a distinct UK identity was maintained.
- 3) Tony Blair's policy represented an ambivalent attitude towards the EU, supporting the EU where it suited national interest and deviating from the general EU members' position when it did not suit the perceived national interest.
- 4) Tony Blair's policy perspective has had an imprint on the UK's policy towards the EU and has made it difficult for successors to deviate from it.

METHODOLOGY

This work on 'A Study on the United Kingdom and European Union's relations during Tony Blair's first term of premiership' is basically analytical. The proposed study will, to a large extent, rely on primary sources, including official Government documents and publications. The study will also critically examine the secondary sources available on the subject matter, such as books, journals, periodicals, magazines and tertiary sources such as newspapers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Review of literature is an important stage of research as it provides the researcher with an overview of what has been done and what is being done. In this background, there exist several works pertaining to the subject matter of the research that could be usefully employed in the research. In this study, a few are mentioned.

Christian Schwinger (2007), in his book on **Britain, Germany and the Future of the European Union (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN Publications, New York)**, has analysed the role played by Britain in the European Union. And the author also analysed Britain and European integration, Britain under Tony Blair's premiership and also discussed Blair's European policies in different fields.

Alistair Jones (2007), in his book **Britain and the European Union (Politics Study Guides), (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh)**, analysed the history of the EU, its institutions and policies. The author also analysed the British applications, the referendum on membership and Tony Blair's premiership.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

TONY BLAIR'S FIRST TERM AS THE UNITED KINGDOM'S PRIME MINISTER: (1997-2001)

After the 1997 general election, the New Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair came to power on May 1, 1997, with an absolute majority in the parliament. This victory was considered one of the remarkable achievements in the Labour Party's election history after so many years. The New Labour Party campaigned with modest manifesto promises to the people. When it came to power, the biggest challenge before the party and the Prime Minister was to implement the manifesto promises into practice.

The Labour Party in its election manifesto made two promises with regard to the UK's relationship with the EU. This included, firstly, holding a referendum on participation in the Single Currency proposal of the EU. Secondly, to take the initiative to reform the EU's functioning. The manifesto also included a more detailed set of action plans for the 1997 UK general election. On the whole, both the Labour and the Conservative parties had introduced similar policy goals in their election manifestos. But the difference here was that, since Tony Blair himself was a pro-European leader, he gave more importance to the introduction of Constructive pro-European policies.

Tony Blair's first term provided several important opportunities to put the manifesto commitments into practice. The first was in the EU's intergovernmental conference (IGC) on treaty reform, which was finally approved in the form of the Amsterdam treaty. The first term of the Blair government was most successful. Progress was achieved in leading reform with support for the Lisbon strategy. The commitment to a referendum on joining the single currency did not materialise because of the Treasury's ongoing evaluation. Progress was achieved on all the detailed 1997 manifesto commitments.

In this context, the study of the New Labour Party's 1997 general election manifesto commitments on the European policy agenda plays an important role in understanding the EU-UK relations during Tony Blair's First term of Premiership from 1997 to 2001.

THE NEW LABOUR PARTY'S 1997 ELECTION MANIFESTO ON EUROPEAN POLICY:

This includes,

1. **Rapid completion of the single market** - a top priority for the British presidency is the rapid completion of the single market.
2. **High priority for enlargement of the European Union** to include the countries of central and eastern Europe and Cyprus, and the institutional reforms necessary to make an enlarged Europe work more efficiently.
3. **Urgent reform of the Common Agricultural Policy** - It is costly, vulnerable to fraud and not geared to environmental protection. Enlargement and the World Trade talks in 1999 will make reform even more essential.
4. **Greater openness and democracy** in EU institutions with open voting in the Council of Ministers and more effective scrutiny of the Commission by the European Parliament.
5. **Retention of the national veto** over key matters of national interest, such as taxation, defence and security, immigration, decisions over the budget and treaty changes, while considering the extension of Qualified Majority Voting in limited areas where that is in Britain's interests.
6. **Britain to sign the Social Chapter** - An 'empty chair' at the negotiating table is disastrous for Britain. The Social Chapter is a framework under which legislative measures can be agreed.

7. **The Single Currency** - Any decision about Britain joining the single currency must be determined by a hard-headed assessment of Britain's economic interests.
8. **Strong defence through NATO** -- The post-Cold War world faces a range of new security challenges- proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the growth of ethnic nationalism and extremism, international terrorism, and crime and drug trafficking.
9. **Our armed forces are among the most effective in the world.**
10. **Labour will conduct a strategic defence and security review** to reassess our essential security interests and defence needs.
11. **Arms control** – A new Labour government will retain Trident.
12. Labour will work for the effective implementation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and for a strengthening of the Biological Weapons Convention.
13. We support a strong UK defence industry, which is a strategic part of our industrial base as well as our defence effort.
14. **Leadership in the international community** – A new Labour government will use Britain's permanent seat on the Security Council.
15. The Commonwealth provides Britain with a unique network of contacts linked by history, language and legal systems.
16. **Promoting economic and social development** – Labour will also attach much higher priority to combating global poverty and underdevelopment.
17. Labour believes that we have a clear moral responsibility to help combat global poverty.
18. We will shift aid resources towards programmes that help the poorest people in the poorest countries.
19. We will work for greater consistency between the aid, trade, agriculture and economic reform policies of the EU.
20. We will support further measures to reduce the debt burden borne by the world's poorest countries and to ensure that developing countries are given a fair deal in international trade.
21. **Human rights** – Labour wants Britain to be respected in the world for the integrity with which it conducts its foreign relations.
22. **A new environmental internationalism** – Labour believes that the threats to the global climate should push environmental concerns higher up the international agenda.
23. Labour believes the international environment should be safeguarded in negotiations over international trade.
24. **Leadership, not isolation** – There is a sharp division between those who believe the way to cope with global change is for nations to retreat into isolationism and protectionism, and those who believe in internationalism and engagement.
25. A new Labour government will use those assets to the full to restore Britain's pride and influence as a leading force for good in the world.

Tony Blair's New Labour government took various policy initiatives with regard to the European Union's single currency, namely the Euro. The UK Chancellor of Exchequer, Gordon Brown, on October 27, 1997, announced the New Labour government's policy towards the Euro. Broadly speaking, there were three key features included in his policy announcement. Firstly, he argued, the Single Currency within a single European market would benefit the people of Europe and Britain in equal measure. Secondly, he argued that there were no constitutional grounds for not joining the Single Currency. The final decision to join the Euro Currency was based on five economic tests. Along with these five economic tests, there was also an obligation to hold a referendum regarding the UK's membership in the EU.

During the New Labour Party's initial years of rule, the major promises made in the manifesto were fulfilled. About manifesto provisions to hold a referendum to continue the UK's EU membership and to join the EU's single currency, the Euro, the New Labour government followed a more practical approach.

CONCLUSION:

Overall, when compared to the previous UK Prime Ministers, such as Margaret Thatcher and John Major, Tony Blair's European policies stand out. His approach towards the European Union and UK relations was completely different, as he showed a more positive attitude towards maintaining a constructive relationship between the two. Basically, Tony Blair himself was a pro-European and had a great ambition to develop a constructive European policy, which was manifested in his party's 1997 general election manifesto. Tony Blair's New Labour government, during its first term in office, developed a more constructive European policy than all previous UK governments. Tony Blair himself was a pro-European leader and had won the 1997 general election with a huge majority of votes over all previous Labour governments in UK history.

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