

Eclipse of the soft left

By Anne Mack

TONY BLAIR has described his new Clause Four as a "defining moment" in the history of the Labour Party. It may be so, if — and only if — he follows it through with a decisive assault on the union link.

But one thing is for certain.

Blair's new Clause certainly is a defining moment for Labour's parliamentary "soft left."

For them, it marks the end of a road.

Far from being a left-wing voice in the inner sanctums of the Labour Party, they no longer even provide "left cover" for the leadership. Their role has changed. They now polemicise against positions they themselves held only weeks, days or even hours, previously. Like prominent but tame dissidents inside a fully blown Stalinist party, they are brought out to defend positions that everyone in the Party knows they oppose.

Blair's regular and systematic humiliation of the soft left and their willingness to subject themselves to such strictures, is intended to discipline the whole party and to narrow down the openings for socialist dissent.

Let us take the most prominent case: John Prescott — would-be working-class hero turned "moderniser" and... lickspittle.

Prescott claims that he started off in the working-class movement as a steward on the Cunard passenger line and as a rank and file activist in the seamen's union NUS. He has even hinted that he was one of the "politically motivated men" who were denounced by Harold Wilson for leading the 1966 seamen's strike and clearing out the corrupt right-wing NUS leadership.

However, no evidence written or oral exists to support Prescott's claim to fame as an industrial insurgent. We can either

take him at his word or trust the verdict of people who really were involved in the battles of '66 and the events leading up to it. One old sea dog who was a member of the central strike committee in '66 described Prescott as "a nonentity. If he played a role none of the actual organisers knew anything about it. He's just a wind boy."

Prescott certainly does seem to possess more wind than brain, tactical sense or socialist principle. But that's not all there is to the man. If we study his evolution over the last decade we can tell a lot about the parliamentary "soft left." Prescott was a key sponsor of "left realignment" — i.e. kow-towing to Kinnock — after the defeat of the miners in 1985.

As front-bench employment spokesman he had kept quiet throughout the bitter twelve preceding months of the pit strike. He rose to prominence in 1987 with a package designed to create "one million jobs in two years." This was the first time that "Johnny" tied himself closely to the demand for "full employment." Kinnock didn't like this, and after the '87 election defeat Prescott found himself demoted to energy. Promises to create jobs were replaced in the Party's public message with Beckett and Brown's refrain: "Only as resources allow."

Prescott re-emerged to prominence as transport spokesman before the '92 general election, during which he went in for quite a bit of old-fashioned socialist rhetoric. He talked about "public services based on need not greed" and the obscenity of an economy that combines homelessness, unemployed building workers and huge stockpiles of bricks.

Fuelled by this performance, Prescott entered the final stage of the campaign to become deputy leader which he had started in 1988.

The decisive moment in all this came with his incoherent but effective "back

John Smith — our leader" speech against the union link at the 1993 Party conference.

Prescott yet again found himself with a front bench job. With Smith committed to full employment — at least verbally — Prescott was free to mouth on about it as much as he wanted.

Then came Blair.

Despite having "full employment" all over his manifesto for the leadership elections, "Johnny" has remained strangely silent on the issue ever since Blair took over the leadership and he became his deputy.

In the months since then Prescott has been stitched up, marginalised and forced to eat his own words.

First there was Clause Four. According to various media sources, fed, we can presume, by the Blair camp, Prescott was never keen on abolition. In fact, he never actually agreed to it, but then he never said no either!

Nevertheless, undaunted by his manifest irrelevance in the Leader's eyes, he was only too keen to jump on Blair's bandwagon. After Blair's resounding defeat on Clause Four on the Thursday of last year's conference, next day Prescott was up there promising not just full employment but that "public ownership will be there" in the new Clause Four.

Well it isn't. Not a word. The "enterprise of the market" and the "rigour of competition" both get a mention but public ownership or full employment don't.

But that did not silence Johnny. He got on the phone and told his friends in the press that the phrase "the opportunity to work and prosper" really meant "full employment — and no slave wages!"

Unfortunately for Prescott, he does not lead the Labour Party. He is not responsible for the Clause Four re-write. As soon as Blair's office got a whiff of Johnny's interpretation of the gospel, Blair was on the Dimbleby programme spelling it out. No, he was not committed to full employment:

"We do not think you can wave a magic wand and secure full employment", explained the next Prime Minister. "It would be dishonest to tell people that after so many years of a Labour government full employment would come back." Blair added: "We are not going to set targets saying there will be so many jobs in a certain time... or say to people that we guarantee you jobs."

This allows us to make sense of the *New Statesman's* description of the press launch of the new Clause Four.

"Sitting next to the leader, his deputy, John Prescott, looked glum. When he endorsed the new clause, claiming that the process of revising Labour's constitution 'has given the party new strength and new confidence in its core beliefs', he seemed

"The emancipation of the working class is also the emancipation of all human beings without distinction of race or sex." Karl Marx

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