



Prescott finds himself sidelined by his leader

strangely lacking in conviction."

If that wasn't enough, within four days Prescott had suddenly found himself removed from all campaign responsibility in the run-up to the general election. Instead, the man who set himself the task of remoulding the post of deputy leader into a campaigning role has found himself in charge of — regions.

But it doesn't end there. Just as the media started the job of interrogating Prescott about his new role he launched another slogan. The Labour Party — he told Radio 4 listeners — was now committed to — not one million jobs in two years, not full employment but — reducing the level of unemployment.

Well. At least Prescott still has a job!

But John Prescott isn't the only "soft left" to find himself publicly humiliated by Blair.

Robin Cook has gone one better: he volunteered to humiliate himself.

Cook has consistently spoken and voted for Blair's abolition of Clause Four. Yet he was prepared to go through the bizarre pretence of being a converted dissident publicly renouncing his past sins. He allowed the Blair press machine to present an otherwise unremarkable speech supporting abolition as proof that Blair had "won over the left."

This brings us to the strange story of David Blunkett who, since Blair sent his kid to an "opt out" school, has had a very bad time indeed.

First there was his idea that maybe a Labour government just might put VAT on private school fees. This idea was immediately disowned by Blair's office. They put up John Prescott to lyingly tell the media that VAT was an option that had already been ruled out in "Party discussions." In fact, no discussion on the issue had taken place on any Party body.

If that isn't bad enough, Blunkett is no longer able to comment on the issue of opt-out schools because this is now "under

discussion" — even though the Party has a clear conference policy for abolition and many local activists are deeply involved in local campaigns against opt-outs. Blunkett is being set up by Blair to play the role of the ex-leftie who backs public schools, in other words, to be a symbol of how much New Labour has changed. His alternative is parliamentary oblivion.

If the spectacle is disgusting, it is put into perspective by the sight of poor old Claire Short, Labour's first career feminist, having to give her blessing to a new Clause Four which doesn't mention either women or black people. She had recommended change precisely because it would allow the concerns of "the oppressed" to be raised in Labour's new statement of aims. It hasn't, but Short is still backing Blair. Short, who likes to think of herself as a Machiavellian, now looks like a victim of the smarter Machiavellians around Blair. A fitting fate for the NEC's token tokenist.

Finally, there is the strange story of the "left of the soft left" — people like Peter Hain, Derek Fatchett and Angela Eagle who put their names to the *New Statesman/Tribune* draft new Clause Four.

This draft was a comprehensive failure. At its House of Commons launch only two out of thirty speakers endorsed it. *New Statesman* editor and ex-Euro-Communist Steve Platt sat on the top table looking sick as speaker after speaker ripped into his incoherent prose.

The result is that the *New Statesman* now keeps pro-Clause Four articles out of its pages. Platt says: "We're bored with Clause Four." Instead, it functions as the mouthpiece for the cynicisms of Eagle, Hain and Fatchett.

Eagle, who a few months ago was going on and on about the need for "a critique of capitalism" in the new Clause, has managed to reconcile herself to the "enterprise of the market" and the "rigour of competition." Hain has commented that though

the new Clause "gives too much priority to the market and there's no commitment to spreading ownership", he still thinks "it's not worth going to the barricades over." Readers may find it strange that someone who has based his career on solidarity with the South African struggle should consider voting against something he disagrees with to be the equivalent of "going to the barricades." But an explanation can be had from the *New Statesman*'s Paul Anderson.

"It (the soft left) knows it will be utterly marginalised if it does not toe the leadership line... Blair has said that the purpose of trying to change Clause Four was not to humiliate the hard left — but there's no doubt whatsoever that the main effect of the exercise on the Party has been to do just that. The soft left knows this, and doesn't want to share the humiliation". But there is humiliation and... humiliation.

What characterises the so-called "left of the soft left" now is that Blair has already succeeded in getting them to jump through hoops for him. They have, as we saw, won nothing in return, not even on full employment. Instead, people who under John Smith appeared to be putting out feelers towards the constituency left and the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, have now been pulled back into line by the parliamentary patronage machine.

In short, forced to choose between their careers and socialist principle they went for what is at the centre of their beings — their careers.

The extent of soft-left self-delusion and depression is merely proof that the strategy pursued by Blair over Clause Four — and not just Clause Four — has been primarily designed to neuter them as a political force. He has succeeded. The soft left are now politically invisible. They have abandoned all their distinctive theses on "full employment", "empowerment" etc.

The left inside the Party and the unions has been decisively re-aligned by the Clause Four battle. While large parts of the old soft left have been annexed by the right wing, other forces, like those around *Tribune* newspaper, have come out of this conflict as serious, principled and honest reform socialists who refuse to abandon deeply held beliefs.

It is now vital to focus the forces that have rallied to Clause Four around a socialist agenda for the next Labour Government.

We need to construct an alliance inside the Party and the unions that can fight for a Labour vote at the next election while continuing to fight within the labour movement — Labour Party and trade unions alike — over issues like the minimum wage, jobs, and the anti-union laws — linking these questions to the case for democratic common ownership. The first priority of such a left will not be to chase after the likes of Peter Hain.

If Blair wins on 29 April, the hard left will still be there snapping at his heels — and later at his throat! — while Peter Hain, and all the other so-called soft left, will roll over, kick their legs in the air, and whimper with gratitude every time the Great One condescends playfully to kick one of them. ■