



# Labour's Sure Thing

by Stuart Reid

Only a fool (or knave) would predict that Tony Blair will be the next prime minister of Great Britain. The general election is at least two years away, and as Harold Wilson observed, a week is a long time in politics; by 1996 Armageddon—or worse—may be upon us. All the same, Tony Blair will be the next prime minister of Great Britain.

The bumbling post-Thatcherite Conservative government of John Major is doomed. The times they are a-changing, but this time it is the mothers and fathers throughout the land who are calling the shots. Professional folk are looking for the quiet life, for balance and perspective; extremism in the defense of idealism is out. The old orthodoxies of left and right have lost their pulling power. Socialism has been rejected, but so has the managerial revolution. The Tory reforms of the National Health Service, for example—in particular the creation of an “internal market” with thousands of new bureaucrats—are deeply unpopular, not least with Conservative voters in the Home Counties. At the same time, the anti-labor mood of the eighties is now so diluted that during this summer’s rail-strike a majority of the public sided with the strikers.

The Great British electorate is experimenting with a new political position, the center. That is why Blair, who was elected leader of the opposition Labour Party in July, will be the next prime minister. He is the natural candidate of the center. He says he is *left* of center, but don’t you believe it, or him. His is slap-dab in the middle, is a paleo-centrist, a conviction moderate. He can’t lose.

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Naturally, Blair is not to everyone’s taste. His delicate good looks have earned him the nickname “Bambi.” He is known also as “Tony Blur”—on account of his apparent unwillingness to commit himself to hard policies. His enemies on the right have sought to blacken his name by (1) accusing him of being “nice” (like Major) and (2) by insisting that he is a pal of Bill Clinton (of which and of whom more later). To the left he is simply the most right-wing, market-friendly leader the Labour Party has ever had.

That’s about the best Blair’s enemies can do. No wonder he smiles a lot. Everything’s going his way. A poll published three days after his election showed that he was ahead of Major in areas where the Tories traditionally lead: for example, on government spending (by 20 points), handling of the economy (22 points), crime (24), and taxes (29). Less than a month after his election, Labour was 33 points ahead of the Conservative Party.

Even readers of the *Daily Telegraph*—by tradition, the “Torygraph”—are abandoning the One True Faith. Support for the Conservative Party among *Telegraph* readers dropped from 70 percent in the second quarter of 1992 to 50 percent in the second quarter of this year, while support for Labour rose from 12 to 23 percent. The middle classes, who, except for a liberal fringe, supported the Great She-Elephant during the 1980s, are now backing Blair. This has not escaped the notice of Rupert Murdoch, the Great Satan himself, who has indicated that he may put his weight behind the new Labour leader.

So who is Tony Blair? Where is he coming from? And why is he the best hope the Labour Party has had since Clement Attlee ran (and won) against Churchill in 1945?

Blair’s family background is a tad less conventional than Major’s. The prime minister’s father was a mere trapeze artist; Blair was the son of a couple of vaudeville artists, Charles Parsons (a.k.a. Jimmy Lynton) and Cecilia Ridgeway, who were not married when he was born. Blair *père* was brought up by William Blair, a Clydebank shipyard rigger, and his wife. He was a bright boy, and a good soldier. He joined the Army in World War II as a private and left as a major. He was thus a “ranker,” an honorary gentleman. After the war he qualified as a lawyer and is today chairman of the Shrewsbury industrial tribunal. He is a solid citizen, a true-blue Conservative. He keeps his own counsel.

Blair’s father is one thing; his father-in-law, Tony Booth, quite another. Booth, star of the 1960s social comedy “Till Death Us Do Part” (on which “All in the Family” was based), is prepared to share his thoughts with the press. He has yet to say anything compromising or more than usually embarrassing, but editors live in hope. Booth is a Liverpool Irish Catholic (like the late John Lennon), and was something of a swinger and a boozier until his luck ran out. On November 17, 1979, finding himself locked out of his girlfriend’s flat, he attempted to gain entry by climbing onto a stack of kerosene drums and crawling through a window. One of the drums exploded, and Booth burst into flames. His feet boiled in his boots. That seems to have been his rock-bottom. At any rate, he has not had a drink since.

It is hard to imagine Blair pulling that sort of stunt, even if he lost the keys to No. 10 Downing Street. He enjoys a glass, but in moderation, and at 41, he looks good on it. He seems to have been temperate all his life, though at school (Fettes, the Eton of Scotland) and at Oxford he was a statutory rebel. He wore his hair long and played in a rock band called the Ugly Rumours.

Blair was not political at university, but he did fall under the spell of an Australian minister, Peter Thomson, who converted him to a form of social Christianity. It was not until he met his future wife, Cherie Booth, in the early seventies—they were student lawyers together—that he began to take an interest in politics. Cherie, like many Liverpool Catholics, was Labour through and through. Under her influence, Blair joined the Labour Party in 1975. He was elected to Parliament in 1983, when Mrs. Thatcher's government was returned for its second term.

From the start Blair was a modernizer, which is to say a right-winger. The story goes that Sir Edward du Cann, a Thatcherite Tory, thought that he was a new Tory MP and warmly welcomed him to the Commons. In fact, he was a pragmatist, who believed that Labour had to ditch its socialist baggage if it was ever again to form a government. He endorsed (and has persuaded the Labour Party to endorse) many of Margaret Thatcher's labor reforms—for example, the outlawing of the closed shop. As Shadow Home Secretary he promised to be "tough on crime—and tough on the causes of crime." (This gave the Tories a nasty fright, since it reassured the bleeding hearts without entirely alienating the "hangers and bashers.") In June he told the *Financial Times*: "We want a dynamic market economy," and soon after his elevation he was being courted, indeed heavily petted, by the City of London. In July he expressed his misgivings about single mothers, and said it was okay to be monogamous. Conservative Central Office began to sweat blood. A letter writer to *Private Eye* pointed out that "Tony Blair MP" is an anagram of "I'm Tory Plan B."

Blair, of course, is stealing the opposition's clothes, much as Clinton did in 1992. Blair and Clinton talk the same language; you won't hear either man say a word against renewal, opportunity, responsibility, and the politics of meaning. Both are lawyers and are married to lawyers. Blair himself has cordial relations with the Clinton administration, not least with Paul Begala and Mandy Grunwald. But Blair is not about to make a role model of a man widely regarded in Britain as either a crook or a clown, or both. Privately, furthermore,

Bambi (three children) and Slick Willy (one) are very different animals. If Britain had been at war in the sixties, Blair would have registered for the draft. If he had smoked dope, he would have inhaled. There is no Paula Jones in his closet, no Whitewater, no Dan Lasater.

Blair will no doubt get on well with Clinton when eventually the two men meet, but then Blair is the sort who would get on equally well with Bob Dole, Phil Gramm, Jerry Brown, even Lyndon LaRouche. He will be more inclined to look to Europe, however, than to America. He is the first leader of the Labour Party wholeheartedly to endorse what is now called the European Union; indeed, he is the first potential prime minister to do so. This means that the United States could not automatically rely on Blair in some future Gulf War. The logic of Blair's foreign policy position—which



resembles that of Helmut Kohl and the other continental conservatives—is that war ought to be waged by Brussels, not by the individual members of the Union.

All this is anathema to the Old Right, of course; yet the Thatcherite "revolutionary defeatist tendency" is covertly campaigning for a Labour victory. The defeatists reason that a Blair government would force the Conservatives to dump Major and to unite behind the robust policies of the eighties. One term of Labour, they figure, and it will be morning in . . . er, in Britain . . . again.

Let us now complicate matters. As the increase in support for Labour among *Telegraph* readers indicates, some conservatives have a genuine liking for

Blair. John Gray, a Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, and a former hard-line Thatcherite, has urged Tories to vote Labour, on the grounds that it is the *conservative* thing to do. Gray's revisionist views have caused a stir in political circles here. In a study published by the Social Market Foundation, he argues that Mrs. Thatcher's "paleoliberalism" has destroyed true conservatism, and that the intellectual hegemony of the right is over. Much of what he says—at least on free trade—echoes the thoughts of that other revisionist conservative Sir James Goldsmith. Here is how Gray makes the case for Blair:

The paradoxical likelihood is that—in Britain at any rate—the task of conserving, perhaps in altered forms, the best elements in our national inheritance will pass to parties which presently think of themselves as being on the Left. If supposed conservatives succumb to the pseudo radicalism of free-market ideology, then genuine conservatives have no option but to become true radicals.

Bambi has good reason to smile, but there is hard and dirty work ahead. Once the honeymoon is over the public will begin to notice that for all his charm and moral purpose, Blair is just another pol. The new Labour leader is going to have to be nimble, especially when he tries to explain how he will deliver better health care, better education and better policing without at the same time indulging in Labour's old "tax and spend" habits. Of

course, many Labourites *want* Labour to tax and spend. Much of Blair's energy will therefore be devoted to selling moderate policies to his own immoderate followers. He will fail, and there will be much foot stomping and door slamming at Labour Party headquarters, but Blair will still win the election. For as well as being in possession of the high ground—the ground occupied by the Volvo-owning middle classes—he has a secret weapon: boredom. After fifteen years, the country has had enough of the Tories. As the far-left MP Ken Livingstone has observed, Labour could win the next election "even with the corpse of Kim Il-Sung as our leader." □



## Wake-Up Calls

by Jonas Bernstein

I was surprised to see Vladimir Zhirinovsky gracing the cover of *Time* recently. I thought that maybe the newspaper kiosk at the Intourist Hotel near Red Square was selling back issues.

When Mad Vlad and his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) stormed the stage in last December's elections, it was the answer to a deep psychic need on the part of Western journalists and other Russia-watchers. Cold Warriors could pick up where they left off, while those of a more liberal bent now had guaranteed great copy without any troubling ideological impediments. This totalitarian, after all, didn't have a "progressive" bone in his body.

Zhirinovsky is already old news in Russia. True, he has managed to get himself expelled and/or banned from just about every country in Western Europe, but such shenanigans have rarely made the front page here. Since his arrival last January for the opening session of the Duma, the new Russian parliament's lower house, the Gorbachev Effect has set in: he's getting much more press abroad than on the home front. Vlad may be the West's worst nightmare, but polls here suggest that a growing number of those who went LDP in December would not do so again.

Quite simply, Zhirinovsky is gaining a reputation as a windbag. So he's the head of one of the largest Duma factions. Big deal. The parliament's lower house, which Grigory Yavlinsky, leader of the reformist Yabloko faction, aptly characterized as "a small child in diapers, replete with all that diapers contain," passed a grand total of ten pieces of insignificant legislation during its inaugural session. Early on, Zhirinovsky got into a slap fight in the Duma cafeteria after he tried to cut in line, but that was the extent of the revolution.

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Eyes began glazing over after his umpteenth threat to put this or that reformer into a labor camp, and he even began openly squabbling with fellow Liberal Democratic Party members. Undaunted, Zhirinovsky, on a visit to Nizhny Novgorod this summer, threw a temper tantrum when local authorities refused to have a limo waiting for him at the airport. He and several LDP goons took over and trashed the empty office of Boris Nemtsov, the reformist regional governor. He found time to drop by the North Korean embassy in Moscow and pay his respects to the deceased Great Leader. But it had all become a bit *neprilichny* (indecent). Zhirinovsky is less the bad boy of Russian politics than its class clown: an embarrassment, a *durak*, a fool.

Add to that the ultimate faux pas for a Russian ultra-nationalist: the new Hitler's father was indeed Jewish! Walking near the former Lenin Museum (a favorite hang-out for extremists) earlier this summer, I happened on a lone LDP supporter selling party paraphernalia and publications. He was being heckled by an old lady, who turned to me and asked, pointing at a poster of Zhirinovsky: "What do you think: is that a Russian face?"

As for Zhirinovsky's message—that's a different story. Russian nationalism is definitely coming into vogue. Ex-finance minister Boris Fedorev—a former director of the World Bank, as urbane and cosmopolitan as they come—was recently asked in a press interview to name the first thing he would do if he became president. One might have expected a disquisition on the need to stimulate long-term savings or something of that sort.

Nope. Fedorev said he would first "solve the problem" of the "rebellion" in Chechnya, the breakaway Muslim region in Russia's North Caucasus, hinting at

steps which even Boris Yeltsin has thus far been loath to take.

Meanwhile, Yeltsin in July made a well-publicized visit to the Central Exhibition Hall on Manezh Square, to see the works of Ilya Glazunov, an artist whose style can best be described as "national-socialist realism." The painting "Wake Up, Russia," for instance, features a bare-chested Aryan-looking Russian youth, his arms outstretched, Christ-like. In one hand he holds the New Testament; in the other, a Kalashnikov. On his belt buckle is written "God is with us!"

Why did Yeltsin choose to visit an exhibition of overtly fascistic art and consort with its creator, whose views are indistinguishable from Zhirinovsky's? The answer is simple: presidential campaigning has begun, and the exhibition was the best attended in the hall's history.

In fact, much of the LDP platform from last fall's campaign has become—albeit in a moderated form—Russian policy.

Zhirinovsky railed against the mistreatment of the 25 million Russians in the "near abroad"—the former Soviet republics. Less than a month later, Yeltsin's spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov rang in the new year by announcing that Russia's foreign policy in 1994 would be based on the "pan-national" idea. And now, eight months later, the Kremlin has promulgated a sort of "Yeltsin doctrine" that links Moscow's relations with the former republics to their treatment of Russian minorities.

Zhirinovsky vowed to put an end to defense conversion, rev up the military-industrial complex, and start selling \$30 billion a year worth of weapons to whomever. Russia recently sold APCs and missile systems to Kuwait—a \$500 million contract—as well as eighteen MiG-29s to Malaysia. The Chinese would like to buy \$5 billion in top-line Russian weapons and technology, much to the dis-