

FOCUS

UK Politics

Why Labour Would Be Even Worse

by R A Shafi Choudhury

Like all pragmatic business managers, the Major and Blair teams accept that they have to operate within limits and budgets. The narrow framework for action which both recognise today has been put in place by a combination of two factors: the Capitalist depression and the shift in the terms of debate over which the Tories have presided during the past 15 years.

AFTER the landslide local election victory of Labour, are you thinking of a Labour government at the next election? Well, if you are, think again. Because you will not know what hit you when Tony Blair takes over.

I know, almost all people would be happy to see the verminous Tories humiliated at the polls after they have ruined so many lives. But, in my opinion that should not blind anybody to the other side of the equation. The likelihood is that the immediate impact of a Labour government would be to make matters even worse for many of us.

I know you can't wait to ask how? For a start, a Blair administration would mean more enthusiastic assaults on the welfare state; more encouragement of the 'flexible' working practices that already condemn millions to low-paid insecure employment; and more intrusive policing of our affairs by the authorities, accelerating the trend towards more censorship, surveillance and control.

This must seem like an outrageous suggestion to many Labour supporters. How, they might ask, could a Labour government ever be as objectionable as these 'bleeding' Tories? To answer this question, we need to grasp just how things have changed in British politics. The party names might be the same, but neither the Conservatives nor Labour have much else in common today with the parties they were 15 years ago.

The changes in the character of the Labour party are often misunderstood. Party spokesmen like to claim that the political and organisational reforms introduced by Blair and his predecessors, John Smith and Neil Kinnock, have revived Labour's fortunes by giving it popular appeal. In fact, both the politics and the poll ratings of Blair's New Labour, have been largely dictated by the Conservatives.

In political terms, Blair's Labour party is one of Thatcher's children and the one for which the old Tory Baroness can feel proud. Through the eighties, the Tories redefined the terms of political debate. The Thatcher government's war against socialism, the trade unions, the public sector and the welfare state impelled the opposition to abandon

ety are the twin themes of British public affairs in the mid nineties.

If Tory and Labour have converged around a pragmatic approach to managing the crisis of the Capitalist system, then why should we believe that Blair would be any better for us than Major?

But there is worse to come for Labour supporters. Look a little more closely, and it appears that New Labour is equipped to pursue the politics of austerity and authoritarianism even more ruthlessly than the Conservatives in the context of today.

The Tories have spent years accusing Labour of being stuck in the past. Yet ironically, it is the Conservatives who are most heavily weighed down by the baggage of history these days.

The long years of incumbency have taken their toll on the Tories. Major constantly finds himself hemmed in commitments and divisions that are the legacies of the past 15 years. His government appears paralysed, unable to act for fear of alienating more of the Tories' traditional base of support.

Blair's Labour opposition has far fewer constraints. He may still encounter the odd hiccup in disposing of a Labourist relic like Clause IV. But in general, New Labour is now travelling light, able to adapt to the present without worrying so much about the baggage of the past. The former student politicians, feminists and communitarian academics who surround Blair are also far better placed than the Tories to translate the demands

of the market system into a language that appears appropriate for the 1990s. The consequence of all this is that Labour can now often be bolder than the government in putting forward policies of austerity and authoritarianism which, if implemented, would make our lives a misery.

New Labour, for example, is ready to go further than the old Tories in dismantling the welfare state. The Commission on Social Justice report lays the foundations for Labour's future welfare policies. It is obvious, that the changes which the Commission proposes are not designed to protect people against poverty, but to protect the Treasury against the demands of the poor.

Containing proposals to abolish student grants and tax child benefit

which Margaret Thatcher in her pomp did not dare to pursue, the Labour backed report provides an accountants view of the welfare state. Pension increases are 'expensive,' so people will have to take out private plans; it is 'not feasible' to make childcare or healthcare for the elderly free at the point of use, so individuals will have to pay.

In content, this is the old Conservative philosophy of leaving the needy to fend for themselves. But presented in the Commission's Blairite language of 'community', the assault on the welfare state is made more palatable for today's political climate—and so poses a more insidious and potent threat.

It is the same story with New Labour's approach to law and order. Despite the best efforts of Labour,

who refused to vote against the draconian Criminal Justice Act, Tory Home Secretary Michael Howard's law and order crusade seems to stall at every turn. Meanwhile Blair's party moves ahead with more and more far-reaching proposals for social control. Presented in the language of liberal and feminist concern for the victims of racism or domestic violence, Labour's proposals to increase police and legal powers can gain widespread support. Yet many go further than the government has yet dared in seeking to strengthen the culture of conformity and control in society.

If you want a glimpse of how repressive it might be to live in Blair's Britain, look at the way Labour local authorities police their housing estates today. Hackney council has introduced the use of civil injunctions to have troublesome tenants evicted or even jailed without trial. Nottingham council has pledged to put spy cameras in the flats of offensive tenants. Leeds council has hired private detectives to mount surveillance operations against its tenants. Imposed under the auspices of anti-racist harassment codes, these mea-

sures pass with little criticism or protest. Yet the consequences are as authoritarian as anything Howard has dreamed up. The danger of New Labour is just not that its policies are reactionary, but they are often accepted as being for the good of the community. The problem is that Blair's brand of reaction is not even seen as a problem.

Do not doubt that Tony Blair's team are the people who will dismantle the welfare state and empower the custodial state at the end of the twenty-first century. Labour's leader and his associates have the puritanical disposition of suburban little England at its worst, without a single libertarian bone in their bodies and with contempt for the irresponsible 'underclass' in their hearts. They want more control on the press and less freedom of speech, more Christian values, more rules and more policemen in every corner of society. Above all, Tony Blair sees himself as Sunday school teacher to a nation of naughty children.

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The Life and Work of Helen Adams Keller

On the occasion of 115th birth anniversary of Helen Keller which just passed on 27th June — a tribute to the greatest of the noble souls who kindled the light of hope for the hearing impaired and visually handicapped the world over.

by Sultana Sarwatara Zaman

HELEN Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in the small town of Tuscumbia, Alabama, in the Deep South of the United States. The Kellers owned many acres of plantation land. But it was a time of economic depression in the South, following the Civil War, so the Keller plantations did not pay. Instead, Helen's father—Captain Arthur H Keller—made a living running a small local newspaper, the North Alabamian.

Captain Keller's first wife died, leaving him with two sons. In 1875 he married again. His new bride, Kate Adams, came from a prosperous, distinguished and very well-connected Southern family.

Helen was Kate Adams Keller's first child, and Captain Keller's first daughter. By all accounts, Helen was a bright, attractive, and very happy baby—she had already learned to walk—until, in February 1882, when she was only nineteen months old, she was struck down with a sudden, terrifying and mysterious illness.

At first, the family doctor thought Helen would die. She had a high fever, and lay motionless, propped on pillows. No one knows precisely what her illness was. At the time, it was described as "acute congestion of the stomach and brain."

In modern medical terms this is meaningless. Doctors now believe that Helen might have had encephalitis, and inflammation of the brain caused by bacteria or a virus.

Helen survived. Her anxious parents sighed with relief as the illness left Helen as quickly as it had struck her down. But relief turned to anguish as they gradually realized how the illness had changed their laughing, lively daughter. She could no longer see them or respond to their voices. Her illness had left her blind and deaf.

From time to time, she still babbled words in baby-talk, but, since she could not hear her parents' answers or see their lips as they spoke to her, she forgot all the words she had ever learned, except "wha-wah", her word for water.

Helen's world had been shattered. She was only two years old, but her world was one of silence, darkness and loneliness. The happy, loving baby had turned into an isolated, tormented child. In frustration at being totally imprisoned by dark silence, Helen kicked out, bit and pinched people.

But Helen also began to help herself. She used her sense of touch and smell—feeling every object carefully, identifying different smells—both inside and outside the house.

It was Helen's mother who discovered the "way to reach her mind". She was reading a book called American Notes, written by Charles Dickens, describing his travels in America. In the great Northern city of Boston, he had been impressed by what he heard of the Perkins Institute for the Blind and its director, Dr Samuel Gridley Howe. The staff at Perkins had trained another deaf-blind girl, Laura Bridgeman, with great success.

But Dr Howe was now dead and, no doubt, his methods had gone with him. However, another great man with an interest in the welfare of deaf-blind people was recommended to Helen's family. He was Dr Alexander Graham Bell, the scientist who had won international fame as the inventor of the telephone. Bell had devoted his life to teaching and helping deaf people and had married one of his students. The Kellers wrote to Dr Bell, asking for his help. He invited them to call on him in Washington and put the Kellers in touch with the new principal of the Perkins Institute in Boston, Michael Anagnos, to see whether he could recommend a private teacher for six-year-old Helen.

To Anagnos, young Anne Sullivan—headstrong, determined and bossy, but also brave, sympathetic and highly intelligent—was the obvious choice to send as a teacher to the "phantom" Helen Keller.

Anne Sullivan had been a pupil at the Perkins Institute for six years. She was not completely blind, but suffered from repeated ailments which affected her eyes, and often caused her pain. She came from a poor, Irish immigrant family.

Anne Sullivan arrived in Tuscumbia on March 3, 1887. She was now twenty-one, and Helen was not quite seven. It was a day Helen has described later as "my soul's birthday". Before that eventful day, she had merely existed. Now she began to live.

It was not an easy process. Helen was wild and quick-tempered, and used only to pleasing herself.

Anne felt determined to reach Helen in spite of the emotional upset it caused both pupil and teacher. One of the first battles for Anne was held in the family dining-room. Seven-year-old Helen had developed some very bad table manners—helping herself to food from other people's plates and eating everything with her fingers. Anne decided not to let her eat from her plate one Monday morning, and a battle of wills began. The rest of the Keller family were so distressed by the scene that followed that they left the room. Anne locked the door and determined to see it through.

Anne and Helen soon made good progress. Helen began to respond to Anne's firm but loving approach. Anne had not been trained as a teacher, but she read all the books she could find on the latest theories of child development.

Perhaps most important of all, Anne thought deeply about how children learn. Around the same time, the great Italian educational reformer, Dr Maria Montessori, was also teaching children how to "learn through play", with astonishing results.

Anne quickly realized that Helen would be more receptive to the lessons if she was removed from her family. Captain and Mrs Keller had always allowed her to do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted.



By moving to a little garden-house about a quarter of a mile from the family home, Anne and Helen could work together without distractions. Helen could learn to depend on Anne and to obey her without having her family there to run to when things did not go her way. The house was "a genuine bit of paradise" to Anne, and Helen settled down to living with Anne.

Among the first words Anne tried to teach Helen were "doll" and "candy", since these were presents which she had brought with her, and which Helen had obviously enjoyed. Helen copied the signs for these words that Anne made into her hand, and seemed to think this spelling was a game, not yet making the connection between the words and the objects they stood for. But it was early days, and Anne was patient. She taught Helen sewing, crochet, knitting and threading glass and wooden beads to make necklaces. They spent long hours together, exploring Mrs Keller's garden.

Then, on April 5, 1887, just over a month since Anne's arrival, the hoped-for breakthrough came. Helen learned that everything has a name and that she could learn all she longed to know from the manual alphabet. Helen had been confusing "mug" and "milk" with the verb "drink". One morning Helen wanted to know the name for "water" and Anne saw an opportunity to clear up the child's confusion over what "mug" and "milk" meant too.

"We went out to the pump-house, and I made Helen hold her mug under the spout while I pumped. As the cold water gushed forth, filling the mug, I spelled w-a-t-e-r in Helen's free hand. The word coming so close upon the sensation of cold water rushing over her hand seemed to startle her. She dropped the mug and stood as one transfixed. A new light came into her face. She spelled 'water' several times. Then she dropped on the ground and asked for its name and pointed to the pump and the trellis, and suddenly turning round she asked for my name. I spelled 'Teacher'."

Helen was overjoyed! From the moment on, Helen never looked back. She was filled with eagerness to learn. Within weeks, she knew over three hundred words, and was learning new words at the rate of five or six each day. Because she was busy, and filled with a sense of achievement, she became much happier, and much better behaved. Now she wanted to please, not to fight, the teacher who had opened this "window" of language for her, and set her free from her prison of loneliness.

Anne Sullivan was delighted at her pupil's progress. She also felt rather awed. She wrote, "It is a rare privilege to watch the birth, growth and first feeble struggles of a living mind; this privilege is mine; and, moreover, it is given me to raise and guide this bright intelligence." Anne proved herself to be among the most original educational thinkers of her day. Although her teaching methods are commonplace now, at the time, they were new, daring and controversial.

Anne Sullivan (whom Helen now called "Teacher", as she was to do for the rest of her life) stayed in the Keller home for the remaining months of 1887.

Early in 1888, Anne took Helen to visit Anagnos at the Perkins Institute in Boston. Anagnos was impressed and delighted with Helen's achievements, and captivated by her happy, loving personality. He persuaded Anne to bring Helen to study every now and then at the Perkins Institute, and introduced her to many people who lived in Boston. Soon Helen's progress began to spread all around the United States. She was still only eight years old.

For the next few years, Helen and Anne divided their

work with John Macy, a young Harvard graduate who was already working as an editor of a magazine for young people. Macy proved to be tremendously useful; he was intelligent, humorous, well-organized and understood the world of publishing.

With Macy's help, Helen's five articles soon appeared. They were so successful that, with Anne, he urged her to turn them into a book. Helen was reluctant. All this writing was hard work, and she was only half-way through her studies at Radcliffe. She was not sure she had anything new to say. But she realized the need to try and earn money to provide for her future.

Together, Helen, Anne and Macy prepared the manuscripts, which contained Helen's own words plus passages by Anne, describing what she had done for Helen. The book, *The Story of My Life*, appeared in 1902, and was widely praised. It was, said the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "full of force, individuality and charm". Macy was convinced that the book would become "a classic", and that it would be read with pleasure for many years to come. It did, and it still is—today it is available in more than fifty languages.

Still rather tired, Helen returned full-time to her studies at Radcliffe. She continued to do well, and won the admiration and respect of all her classmates, who recognized that she had to work immeasurably harder than they did. At last, Helen graduated—marked "excellent in English letters"—in the summer of 1904. It was a remarkable achievement, and Helen's friends were very proud of her. What marvel would she achieve next? One friend, Dr Hele, wrote to her, in a prophetic tone, "...the whole boundless universe is yours."

But was Dr Hele's prophecy true? Just how many opportunities were really open to someone, like Helen, who was deaf and blind? Helen herself had already recognized the problems, and had spoken out, in a typically generous way, on behalf of all suffering people, in a speech she made to Radcliffe college graduates earlier in 1902.

In 1905, Anne and John Macy were married. They had fallen in love while they worked together helping Helen with her book.

While *The Story of My Life* had not been a runaway best-seller, it had provided Helen and Anne with enough money to buy a house in Wrentham. Here they hoped to settle and to make a living by writing and occasionally lecturing, although, for the moment, they were still supported by charitable funds. John Macy came to live with them there.

Helen became a public figure. Helen's concern for people with impaired sight or hearing— or who were suffering in any other way—was also well known. In 1906, Helen, now twenty-six, received the first of many invitations to sit on public committees, and to act as a spokesperson for blind people. The state of Massachusetts was one of the first to set up a Commission for the Blind, and Helen was one of its first members. She played an active part campaigning for better treatment and opportunities for blind people.

Helen also hit the headlines with her campaigns on another issue related to blind welfare.

Helen was increasingly determined to spend time helping the people who did not get reasonable treatment from society. As yet, she had remained largely uninvolved with party politics, although she had followed with interest the struggles of women in England and America to win the vote. In her journal she recorded comments on burning political issues of the day; these reveal that she regularly sided with the poor and oppressed, although her preference was always for peace, rather than conflict and bloodshed.

In 1909, Helen became a member of the American Socialist Party, and, assisted by Macy and, to a lesser extent, Anne (who was following her husband), joined enthusiastically in many of its campaigns.

Helen's works brought her, and all people with special needs, increasing respect. In 1932, The Pictorial Review gave her its annual prize for the "most noteworthy contribution by a woman." This was a real mark of distinction. She was awarded honorary degrees by American universities. Publishers asked her to write more books and articles, and she had been introduced to an adept and sympathetic editor, Nella Braddy Henney, who would help her with almost everything she wrote.

Helen enjoyed her busy life; she knew she was working well, and helping people. But her happiness was overshadowed by worry. Anne had just turned seventy and was ill and tired. Now she, too, was almost blind. Together, Helen, Anne and Polly spent time away together which they hoped would build up Anne's strength. Bravely, Anne fought against her growing weakness—"I am trying so hard to live for you," she said—but on October 30, 1936, she died. Helen had Polly to help her, and many kind and willing friends, but no one could possibly replace Anne Sullivan Macy. She was a woman of great character, skill and devotion. She had generously given her whole life to helping Helen Keller. How would Helen survive without her?

To help blot out her grief, Helen decided to travel overseas. She had received many invitations to visit blind people in other countries, and to inspect the services and facilities provided for them. With Polly, she decided to visit Japan, and their trip was a great success. Crowds came to greet her, and she was received as an important guest.

In 1951, they went to South Africa. The Zulu people called Helen "Homvusele"—"You who have aroused the consciousness of many." In 1952 they lectured extensively within the United States. Their next trip was to India, then back again to Japan.

Helen Adams Keller, aged eighty-eight, died at home, peacefully, in 1968. She was buried in America's National Cathedral, in Washington DC, a reflection of her great achievements and position as one of the most loved and respected women of the early twentieth century. She had triumphed against tremendous difficulties to bring hope, dignity and a measure of justice to people with special needs in America and beyond.

On her eightieth birthday, newspaper reporters asked her what plans she had for the future. Her reply was characteristic: "I will always—as long as I have breath—work for the handicapped."

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Margaret Thatcher and John Major: Iron Lady and Grey Man

traditional Labourist principles and distance itself from the working classes. By the time Thatcher was replaced by John Major in 1990, Labour was a shell of a party that could only emit faint echoes of Tory policies on everything from the market economy to law and order.

If the dominance of the Tories in the eighties transformed the Labour party's outlook, the weakness of the

parties broadly conforms to Treasury orthodoxy, with an emphasis on reducing public spending, especially on welfare, and holding down wages while intensifying work. In the political arena, meanwhile, all the major parties now reject bold proposals for social reform in favour of Conservative demands for more law and order and social control. The need to impose austerity and authority on soci-

Good Luck Crickets!

Reuters reports from Paris

FRENCH insect lovers want part of the Paris metro to be declared a nature reserve, fearing the railway is getting too clean for rare colonies of crickets chirping in the warm, dark tunnels.

While most travellers welcome a drive to clean up the metro and rid it of mosquito-toes, rats and other pests, one insect pressure group wants special measures to protect the crickets, whose buzzing is a symbol of good fortune in French folklore.

Ideally, we'd like the two metro lines where there are the most crickets to be declared a natural park for them. The Paris region needs more parks," said Lionel Antoine, president of the protection league for the crickets of the Paris metro (LPGMP).

The group, which counts a member of parliament among its 100 or so members, also advocates laying out food for crickets deep below the streets of the capital and drawing attention to their singing as a tourist attraction.