Europe and Beyond

Supranational progress

The first day of May is earmarked in the calendar as May Day, ‘as a festival with dancing, or as an international holiday in honour of workers’.1 Indeed, it is otherwise known as ‘Labour Day’, being ‘celebrated in honour of working people’.2 As chance would have it, 1 May 1997 turned out to be a particularly notable day in the history of the Labour Party in Britain:


The Labour Party’s general election victory was commemorated two years later with various assessments of the government’s record.3 For instance:

This is the half-way mark. We are equidistant between two [general] elections. Two years ago today Labour won power in one of the great landslides of British political history, and the party will probably choose to face the voters again two years from now [...]. So, May 1, 1999 offers a sensible moment to take a look at how Labour is getting on. The remarkable truth is that it still feels like a novelty [...]. The [opinion] polls underline that: the latest shows Labour 23 points ahead of the Conservatives, their position enhanced since the general election [...]. [For] Tony Blair and New Labour, the honeymoon has never really ended. [But], what of the substance of Labour’s record? Here a clear theme emerges
Labour has adopted the right ideas on social and constitutional policy, the economy, Europe, Northern Ireland and Kosovo: but sometimes it needs to act on those ideas more boldly [...]. In Europe, the Government has condemned the democratic deficit of the European Union, exposed so graphically in this year’s mass resignation of the Commission. It needs to be still more positive in that area, with Tony Blair exploiting for good purpose the fact that he has fewer restraints on his power than any other European leader. He has already done that over Kosovo, although here too, we would urge him to go further: if diplomacy fails, fighting the ethnic cleansers from the air will not work alone. [The] war needs to be fought on the ground. (The Guardian, 1 May 1999)

Similarly, Polly Toynbee marked ‘the anniversary of the election’ by telling us:

Two years on, a little balder, a little greyer, Tony Blair bestrides the nation as lord of all he surveys with power undreamed of by dictators [...]. So what crumb remains on the miserable Tories’ table? Only the anti-European chalice, but they know a sip from that plunges them into mortal schism [...]. No, they are lost, utterly lost. Better for them to [...] wait for things to go wrong [...]. Start with the war [in the Balkan region], a clear and present danger that could plunge into calamity as easily as missiles corkscrew off course [...]. That would end any chance for the Blair doctrine, any hope for his vision of the rich [West] at last taking common responsibility for humanitarian disasters around the world. It would also break the spirit of the European idea, reducing the EU to a spineless rich man’s trading club, selfish and politically meaningless, precisely what the Europhobic Tories always wanted. For that reason it can’t be allowed to happen. European leaders in shaky coalitions may blanch now and then, but even if it takes longer and costs more, the price of failure is too high to contemplate. Blair has more invested in this than most. For how would he fight a successful referendum campaign for Britain’s entry into the Euro amid the ruins of European idealism? (Toynbee, 30 April 1999)

To the fore of Toynbee’s and others’ views of the Labour government’s first two and forthcoming years were points about the relationship between the UK and the rest of Europe, European integration and the EU. The Labour government had been ‘positive in that area’, especially in comparison with the previous Conservative government and, furthermore, the contemporaneous, predominantly ‘anti-European’ and ‘Europhobic’, Conservative Party under the leadership of William Hague. From writers who themselves appeared to be Europhiles, the Labour government and, in particular, its leader Tony Blair received generous praise for their commitment to ‘the European