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A study of the policies and perspectives of Tony Blair's Labour government towards European Union

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Abstract---This paper mainly explains about United Kingdom and European Union relations during Tony Blair's period. After UK's membership to EU in 1973, it had not actively engaged in the European Union's policy initiatives and implementation process. From 1973 to 1996, the successive UK Prime Ministers followed a negative and skeptical attitude towards various EU policy initiatives and none of the UK Prime Ministers showed any special interest to improving its relations with EU. In this juncture, Tony Blair's Labour government made a huge difference in the European Union and United Kingdom's relationship. The Labour party came to power in UK after the 1997 UK General election. It in its 1997 election manifesto introduced the pro-European policy strategy goals and this was whole heartedly supported by the UK people. As a result, it won the election by a huge majority of votes in its party history. The 1997 election gave new direction to the UK's EU policy. Blair's pro-European policy initiatives made a huge change in the EU-UK relations. His government from the very beginning made clear to the UK citizens that their government would take more pro-active and constructive role in the EU policy making and various developmental programmes. In this context the study of Tony Blair's Labour government's policies and perspectives towards European Union gives better understanding of United Kingdom and European Union's relations during that period.

Keywords---European monetary union, Kyoto protocol, EU presidency, Lisbon strategy, Amsterdam treaty, the nice treaty.

Introduction

The Tony Blair's Labour government came to power in 1997 at United Kingdom and it aimed to pursue a constructive European policy from that of previous John Major's conservative government. Crux of the policy was to establish some kind of British 'Leadership' within the EU. The policy of Labour government of Tony Blair towards EU modernization and change. It was making a break from the policies of UK in recent past, notably its 1983 manifesto of withdrawal from the European Communities, state intervention in the economy and nuclear disarmament. The Tony Blair's government succeeded in placing a British imprint upon the EU; but continued as non-member of the Euro that in a way restricted its aspirations to play leadership role in the EU.

Rationale of the study

The proposed research will focus on the policies and perspectives of Tony Blair's Labour government towards European Union. Stress here is firstly on UK's policies towards EU. Secondly, the study also aims to understand Tony Blair's foreign policy in the context of EU and does not deal exclusively with its foreign policy.

Objectives of the study

In the light of above, the proposed research aims to understand the following:

- To understand the reason behind Tony Blair's involvement in EU.
- To analyze as to what extent UK differs from other EU member states in EU Politics.
- Internal debate in EU regarding Tony Blair's role in various policies.
- Impact of Tony Blair's policies on EU and its wider ramification.

Hypothesis

- Tony Blair sought to change the role of UK in EU. Distinct to his predecessor he brought about a pro-EU image of UK.
- Tony Blair also sought to maintain continuity in UK's policy towards EU. On core areas distinct UK identity was maintained.
- Tony Blair's policy represented an ambivalent attitude towards EU supporting EU where it suited national interest and deviating from the general EU member's position when it did not suit the perceived national interest.
- Tony Blair's policy perspective had an imprint on the UK's policy towards EU and has made it difficult for successors to deviate from it.

Methodology

This work on 'A Study of the policies and perspectives of Tony Blair's Labour government towards European Union' is basically an analytical work. The proposed study will to a large extent rely on primary sources including official,

Government documents and publications. The study will also critically examine the secondary sources available on the subject matter such as books, journals, periodicals magazines and tertiary sources such as newspapers.

Literature review

The Review of literature is an important stage of research as it provides the researcher an overview of what has been done and what is being done. In this background, there exist several works pertaining to the subject matter of the research that could be usefully employed in the research. In this study mentioned a few. Christian Schwinger, (2007), in his book on Britain, Germany and the Future of the European Union (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN Publications, New York,) has analyzed the role played by Britain in the European Union. And the author analyzed Britain and European integration, the Britain under Tony Blair's premiership and also discussed Blair's European policies in different fields. Alistair Jones, (2007), in his book Britain and the European Union (Politics Study Guides), (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh,) analyzed the history of the EU, its institutions and policies. The author also analyzed the British applications, the referendum on membership and Tony Blair's premiership.

Analysis and Findings

Tony Blair's labour government's policies and perspectives towards European Union

After the 1997 general election, Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair came to power on May 1, 1997 with an absolute majority in the parliament. This victory was considered as one of the remarkable achievements in the Labour Party's election history after so many years. It campaigned with modest manifesto promises to the people. When it came to power, the biggest challenge before the party and the Prime Minister was to implement the manifesto promises into practice. The Labour government, in its election manifesto had made two pledges before the people: to hold a referendum on participation in the in single currency; and to lead reform in the EU. During New Labour Party's initial years of rule, the major promises made in the manifesto were fulfilled. With regard to manifesto provisions to hold a referendum to continue the UK's EU membership and to join EU's single currency, Euro the New Labour government followed a more practical approach.

Tony Blair's New Labour government took various policy initiatives with regard to European Union's single currency, namely Euro. The UK Chancellor of Exchequer, Gordon Brown, on October 27, 1997 announced the New Labour government's policy towards Euro. Broadly speaking, there were three key features included in his policy announcement. Firstly, he argued, the Single Currency within a single European market would benefit the people of Europe and Britain in equal manner. Secondly, he argued that, there were no constitutional grounds for not joining the Single Currency. The final decision of joining the Euro Currency was based on five economic tests. Along with these five economic tests, there was also an obligation to hold a referendum regarding UK's membership to the EU.

Tony Blair's first term provided a number of important opportunities to put the manifesto commitments into practice. The first was in the EU's inter-governmental conference (IGC) on treaty reform that finally was approved in the form of Amsterdam treaty. The broad impression of the British Presidency was positive. But government was unable to occupy a central position in respect of the EU's policy agenda. Specifically, the launch of the final stage of European Monetary Union (EMU), at a special European council on 1st May, was an important moment in the EU's history.

After its victory in the 2001 UK general election, the New Labour Party formed the second Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair. During its second term of office, the government made some changes in the cabinet. Basically, these changes were made to develop a constructive goal-oriented EU policy initiative. Jack Straw was appointed as a new Foreign Secretary in place of Robin Cook and Peter Hain as a minister for Europe to assist Jack Straw on European policy matters. The New Labour party in its 2001 UK general election manifesto made a promise of 25 'Steps to a Better Britain'. This policy objectives and goals play an important role in developing EU-UK relations. Among them the major policy objective was to 'Long term Economic stability and lead economic reform in Europe'. This manifesto objective was greatly highlighted in the 2001 UK general election.

In the May 5, 2005 UK general election, the New Labour Party fought the election with modest European policy objectives in its manifesto promises. It stressed for four important issues. They are, firstly, to give approval to the EU constitutional treaty through referendum. Secondly, to promote economic reforms in the European Union countries. This objective was highlighted in the party manifesto was basically for the 2005 UK presidency of the EU. The economic reforms include, control, regulation, development in the Doha round, supporting EU membership for Turkey, the Balkans and other Eastern European countries and also to give attention to the EU aid to less developed countries of the world. Thirdly, it also assured to enhance leadership in European defence co-operation programme. Finally, it also declared to continue a sound policy on Euro currency. This includes to fulfill the chancellor's five economic tests, parliament's approval and finally of holding a referendum to get people's approval.

In this regard, the French and the Dutch governments held a referendum for the approval of EU constitutional treaty in their countries. But in the referendum that followed, people rejected the constitutional treaty's implementation in their countries. This greatly affected the implementation of the first manifesto objective into practice and also these developments strongly gave the message to UK government to not hold referendum for implementation of the EU constitutional treaty. Tony Blair gave an historic speech to European parliament at Strasbourg on 23 June, 2005. In his speech, he called for reform to social and economic policies of EU for the future global challenges and also criticized the role played by agriculture in EU budget.

Conclusion

The first term of the Blair government was most successful. Progress was achieved in leading reform with support for the Lisbon strategy. The commitment to a referendum on joining the single currency did not operationalize because of the Treasury's ongoing evaluation. Progress was achieved on all the detailed 1997 manifesto commitments. The promotion of European security and defence policy arising from the 1998 St.Malo bilateral initiative with France was a concrete demonstration of a more constructive policy, which placed a British imprint on the EU. Two rounds of treaty reform (Amsterdam and Nice) were concluded by the Labour government with no major isolation.

The second term was more fractious with partner states because of divisions within the EU that were opened up by the Iraq invasion. Although a major protagonist in the divisions, the UK was never isolated in the way that it had been on foreign policy beforehand, for instance in supporting the US bombing of Libya. It was difficult to identify the major achievement to lead economic reform in the EU. Instead, it was trying to advance the Lisbon strategy and relevant legislation on the single market and competitiveness in EU politics. The 2003 recommendation on against joining the EURO was an important step of Labour government on EU policy that went against its manifesto commitment. It was re-elected in the election for the third Consecutive term with a very lowest parliamentary majority of 65 seats. In this election, Tony Blair was not able to get people's full support to his government's constructive European policy. This election revealed the decreased popularity of the New Labour party as well as Tony Blair following the 2003 Iraq war.

Overall, the ten years of Labour government's European policy goals considered as bipartisan, completion of the single market, enlargement, reform of the Common Agricultural policy and retention of the Veto over matters of national interest. Nevertheless, there has been reasonable achievement of Labour governments manifesto objectives in its European policy. The UK was less isolated in the EU. But the real area weakness for Labour government has been in respect of building domestic consensus on its European policies. Tony Blair's own effort to change domestic public opinion's perception of the benefits of European integration was unsuccessful. Economic competitiveness, climate change, internal security, combating global poverty: these and other objectives of the government require active complementary action by the EU. The Labour government's efforts to explain the situation to the domestic electorate have been very weak. The Labour government has failed to create a new consensus over European policy. The Labour government has delivered a more constructive European policy but built on weak domestic foundations. In other words, Tony Blair's constructive engagement with the EU did not alter the people's perception towards EU. Officially UK under Tony Blair became important and considerate partner to other EU countries in the European Project. Despite its failure to link itself completely with EU's economic and financial projects, in particular Euro.

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