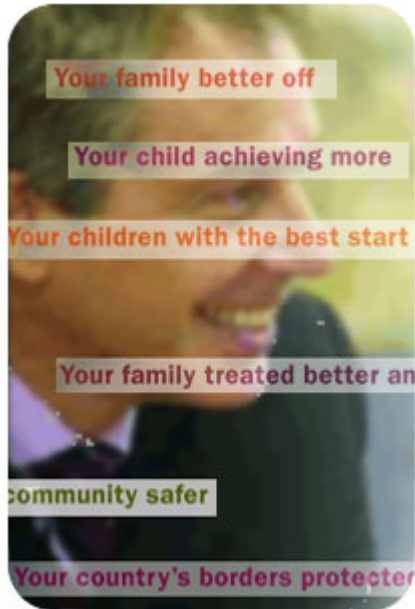


MAKING THE PLEDGE



This is a time to explore some important contradictions. When I went off to Rome 's anti-war rally on the anniversary of 9/11, the British press were obsessed with something else. Blair had just appointed Alan Milburn to a Cabinet post that will take charge of Labour's next election manifesto. It was seen as a direct challenge to the power of the Chancellor, Gordon Brown.

Every one of the new 6 pledges has a slippery feel to it. Do any of them offer the reassurance that Britain will not, again, be mis-led into an illegal war; that universal pension rights will be restored and protected; that the privatisation of essential public services (at home and abroad) will be reversed; that the most fragile legacy our children's lives depend on – the environment – will be the centre piece of a new approach to economics? Against all of these big issues, the

pledge card slips into the shadows.

Instead of using this as an opportunity to engage the public in a discussion of genuinely 'big picture' politics, we are already being prepared for the opposite. However attractive it is for party tacticians or political analysts to assume that the election can be fought and won on 'negative campaigning', it is something we have to fiercely resist. In some ways the race to the Right has already begun. Proposals for new powers of house arrest and national identity cards are not only absurdly ill-thought out, they also fan up a sense of national insecurity that weakens and divides society.

Apply it to your own family. What sort of democracy would you feel you were living in if you found yourself placed under house arrest, electronically tagged, denied access to a phone or mobile phone, given no access to legal representation or a court of law and kept in ignorance of any charge against you? The Home Secretary says it would only be in exceptional circumstances; but why would Britain impose a regime that every other country in Europe rejects? Al Qaida does not need to attack us when we so readily attack ourselves.

In similar terms, Labour MPs are told that ID cards are a vote winner over the Tories because the public feel it would be a protection against crime, terrorism and illegal immigration. No effort is made to have a grown up discussion of the proposal. The terrorists responsible for 9/11 were all perfectly legit as far as ID documents were concerned. Other countries with national ID card systems recognise how irrelevant this is to countering terrorism. Before Britain signs up to the £10 billion it will probably cost us, we ought to ask at least a couple of important questions.

A national ID system can only apply to UK citizens. The 500 million people who live in the enlarged European Union all have freedom of movement throughout the EU. This includes freedom of movement within the UK. As a crime reduction measure, a national ID card system would either be irrelevant or it would assume that the greatest crime threat comes from ourselves.

The second mega issue about ID cards concerns the technology of biometric identification and coding. There are two things we know for sure about technological innovation. One is that the costs always spiral ahead of their projections. The other is that crooks will work out how to steal it or subvert it long before the rest of us have worked out even how to use it.

Banks already know that identity fraud is the fastest growing, hidden crime area they have to deal with. If/when criminals can encrypt, transfer or transform details from ID cards, the scope for new crime becomes immense. In the end, the public may still want a national ID card system, but we should not even contemplate introducing one without a serious open discussion about the risks attached to possible theft of our most personal medical, financial or genetic details.

All of this is the politics of fear and insecurity. It is what negative campaigning is all about. I've just heard a radio programme arguing that negative campaigning stimulates public interest and voter participation. They cited the recent US elections as evidence of how it could boost the turnout levels. What a travesty of an argument.

The US suffered rather than benefited from negative campaigning in the Presidential elections. American society is more divided today than it has ever been; and divided on big issues, not the distractions of who is closer to God, who sentenced most people to death, or who had the most patriotic military service record.

John Kerry lost because the Democrats, in the end, never stood up on the big issues, rather than that they failed to shovel enough crap onto the President's lap.

They knew, even in the Clinton years, that the Bush camp wanted a war on Iraq. It was their failure to challenge this right from the start that made their election challenge so flawed.

Today, Americans are waking up to discover Bush intends to steal (privatise) their pensions because the budget deficit can not support both the costs of war and the cost of pensions. It was one of the big election choices that US voters were never offered; to vote for a war on poverty or a war on the poor.

So too the environment. Some parts of America are in their sixth consecutive year of drought, with water resources heading towards crisis decisions between water for public consumption and water for intensive agriculture. Other states are being wrecked by hurricanes and extreme weather conditions whose intensity is a part of the climate change crisis we face. Yet the Democrats refused to allow the environmental crisis agenda to challenge the business-as-usual follies of the Bush administration.

The same dangers face us in Britain as we head towards our own general election. The big issues could slip off the agenda because we lack the courage to address them. Dishing the dirt becomes the cheap and cheerless alternative to serious politics. So here are my own two pledges. First, I will have nothing to do with negative campaigning. Second, I will not duck from the big issues voters have to engage with in decisions that will shape the 21st century.

As soon as you do this the debate becomes transformed. Britain was not conned into a war by a terrorist threat, but by the lack of openness (and scrutiny) in our own democratic system. If we want to tackle destabilising, tidal migrations of people we need to get tough on the conditions that produce them

(wars, tyrannies and famine) rather than getting tough on the victims of war.

We do not have a pension's crisis, but a crisis in what we have allowed pension funds to be used for. Over £250 billion was 'lost' from UK pension funds because the money was allowed to be gambled away in pursuit of dot. com delusions. Investment rules used to favour 'infrastructure' investment (in schools, hospitals, transport systems and the environment). The value of this was not only in secure pensions, but also in UK jobs and 'quality of life' dividends.

We could do the same today, but we need a new politics of solidarity with ourselves. It is a solidarity not just between one generation and the ones that follow it, but a solidarity with ourselves and the land we steward; between ourselves and the planet we share.

If we have the courage to put these choices to the public, and not pretend we can steal from each other (or steal from tomorrow) and find genuine security, then the politics of fear can be replaced by the politics of hope. This is the 'pledge' that Labour has to make.

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