

COMMENT**JOSEF JOFFE****Blair is
still a
beacon to
leaders on
the left**

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from the left. That is why
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snail's pace of change on the
continent want to keep Blair

You have to read Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, the best description of globalisation and the inexorable forces of capitalist production, to understand why Tony Blair, now seeking a third term as UK prime minister, deserves a place in the history – and the future – of Britain and Europe.

It has become unfashionable to say anything nice about Mr Blair, "poodle" of George W. Bush and "Grand Fibber" in the run-up to the Iraq war. But look again. Mr Blair took over where Margaret Thatcher had left off. He refused to go back to bad Old Labour, a party mired in the illusion of "democratic socialism in one country". Unlike Labour leaders of the past, he understood that the welfare state, which finally triumphed in postwar Britain, was premised on a closed economy, where competition was constricted, regulation rampant and taxation high.

Mr Blair must have read his Marx, who got globalisation right the first time round and saw what effect the new "modes of production" would have on the cosy old ways of doing things. When the second wave of globalisation began to swell in the 1990s, Britain was better prepared to surf it than any other European economy – and still is. Instead of rolling back Thatcherism, Mr Blair took the "Third Way", something he unsuccessfully tried to foist on Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, now beset by the lowest growth rate in the European Union and 12 per cent unemployment. France and

Italy are hardly doing better.

Shunning "nanny-statism", Mr Blair celebrated the virtues of the market. He moulded Old into New Labour. Appealing to British individualism, he turned welfare into "workfare". Arguing against a culture of entitlements, he preached responsibility and self-reliance. Having also read David Ricardo, the 19th-century British economist, he grasped the law of comparative advantage, which allowed the deregulated City to capitalise on its towering perch as one of the two great financial centres of the world.

The prize has been, and remains, impressive. Whereas Europe is stuck in a decade-old slump, Britain enjoys growth in the 3 per cent range. Its unemployment rate is half that of most of continental Europe. And London is to Europe what New York is to America: a magnet for the best and the brightest. Britain's best universities are among the world's finest. To keep them that way, the Blair government has increased fees because a precious good such as education must command a price that reflects its true costs.

Mr Blair deserves a third term, then. Michael Howard, leader of the Conservative opposition, would make a good prime minister, too. But there is another reason for favouring Mr Blair: if Mr Howard and the Conservatives win – or Labour wins, but only narrowly – Gordon Brown, Britain's chancellor of the exchequer, will become leader of the Labour party sooner rather than later. That might well presage a return to Old Labour.

Why do I take such a dim view of this prospect? Let us shift to a European perspective. If Labour, minus Mr

Blair, lurches back to the left, it will be the definitive end of the Third Way. Yet as long as Blairism is alive, it can serve as a high-wattage beacon – albeit a lonely one – for Europe's other social democratic parties, whose dominant habits are statist. (Come to think of it, even nominally rightwing parties such as Jacques Chirac's in France do not believe in free markets, personal initiative and globalised competition.) If Mr Blair is chucked out, what will keep Mr Schröder, Spain's José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Italy's Romano Prodi and the rest from succumbing to the worst instincts of their parties – to protectionism, regulation and high taxation at home, and to anti-Americanism in foreign policy? Mr Blair might be a poodle, but, with his soft bark, he keeps the Europeans from straying too far off the Atlantic reservation. Indeed, since the handover of power in postwar Iraq and the clean elections defied the grim predictions of most Europeans, Mr Blair has looked more like an Alsatian than a lap-dog.

Unlike Britain, with its old liberal and individualist tradition, Europe can only be reformed from the left. And that is why those of us who despair of the snail's pace of change on the continent want to keep Mr Blair. Given Europe's sour mood and its ancient anti-capitalist reflexes, invoking rightwing reformism *à la* Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, former US president, is a sure way to lose any debate. But New Labour is one of us, so to speak, and that is why we wish Blairism a long life – for Europe's sake.

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