

High stakes for Labour

The party must show a new clarity of purpose to stave off the prospect of a decade of Tory rule

Charles Clarke

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Labour is faced with the need to hold firm to two insights. The first is that politics matters: the outcomes of political contests change the lives of millions of people. The second is that there is nothing inevitable about politics: the efforts and insights of individual people can and do change political results.

Many pessimistic or cynical pundits, and others, promote differing views. They recycle the saw that "there's no real difference between Tory and Labour". They argue that Labour has reached the natural end of its period in power. They suggest that politics will be helped by one term of the Tories in office, after which Labour will return refreshed. I believe that these gloomy views are very wrong but that Labour has to do far more to prove them wrong and to build a strong and confident progressive government founded on its focus on the future.

There have been four basic cycles of political power since 1951. The first, 1951-1964, saw 13 years of Conservative government. The second, 1964 to 1979, had 15 years of relatively unsuccessful Labour dominance. The third, 1979 to 1997, consisted of 18 years of generally effective (though mostly wrong) Conservative government. The fourth, 1997 to present, has seen successful Labour government. Each cycle began with energy, enthusiasm and direction. But the first three ended when three ingredients came together: a government that seemed lethargic and unfocused; an opposition that offered a genuinely fresh and different programme for change; and opposition leaders (Wilson, Thatcher and Blair) who were new and could be trusted.

On this basis, if Labour gets it all wrong, and the Conservatives get it all right, the next general election (I expect it in May 2010) will be the next major turning point, leading to more than a decade of Tory power. But if Labour gets it right, it could easily win well again, and even lay the basis of a Scandinavian-style "progressive century", where our approach and values become entrenched. So the stakes are high.

The Conservative opposition is still far from showing that it can be trusted with power. That is why David Cameron is attempting to lead "from the centre", while travelling light with policy. His difficulties on, for example, grammar schools and EU cooperation indicate how far his party

has to go. Labour, which must press on Conservative policy intentions, must demonstrate clarity, decisiveness and a lucid sense of purpose - culminating at the next election in a clear offer to the country that shows Labour's capacity to address the challenges of the future. To defend past achievements will not be enough.

Since Tony Blair announced his retirement in October 2004, inner-party politics has dominated attention, and consequently Labour has wasted much of the first half of this parliament. With some exceptions, our efforts to make the necessary changes have been insufficient. And it seems to me that Labour remains very unclear about its approach, both in this parliament and the next.

Everyone will have their priorities. On my list are environmental sustainability, modern and effective public services, and our relationship with the EU and the wider world. But whatever the specifics, we must all understand that rhetoric about past Conservative failures and past Labour success will not disguise a failure to face the future effectively. Both now and at the next general election, Labour in government needs to show its commitment to change in practice, and its readiness to promote discussion of the best ways to achieve that.

Charles Clarke, a former home secretary, is the Labour MP for Norwich South; this is an edited extract from an article in February's Progress magazine