



24 September 2007

Prime Minister's Speech to the Labour Party Conference on 24 September 2007

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After the speculation, came the substance. Following the change, came the continuity.

Today's newspapers – and discussions amongst the delegates - may have been dominated by the question of whether Gordon Brown would call an early election, but the prime minister and leader of the Labour Party used his first conference speech to set out his policy agenda and stress that he was getting on with the job.

The challenge in this conference speech was for Mr. Brown to get the right balance between continuity and change. To show that this is a new government, with a new team and new priorities, focussed on the future, but building on the achievements, themes and policies of the previous decade.

Although Gordon Brown used the language of change, the content of the speech emphasised continuity. In a speech which was explicitly New Labour, Mr. Brown spoke of opportunity and aspiration, framing his speech through the prism of rights and responsibilities, and stating “I stand for a Britain where we all have obligations to each other and by fulfilling them, everyone has the chance to make the most of themselves.”

In a speech that played to Mr. Brown's abilities – his strength, his seriousness and substance - the real audience was not the delegates in the hall, but the country at large.

Commentators will no doubt focus on the change in style and delivery away from the vision and rhetoric of Tony Blair's recent conference speeches. But one of the most interesting aspects of this speech was the personal change in style and emphasis from Gordon Brown himself. From this most political of politicians, there was no reference to his opponents. The Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Cameron and Campbell did not get a single mention. Gone were the dividing lines, references to boom and bust and the usual party political knockabout. No longer need Gordon Brown present himself as an alternative to Tony Blair and the result was a speech which was more New Labour and more personal than in recent years.

It was a very personal speech: with references to his background, his father and his faith.

It was a very patriotic speech: praising the resolve and resilience of the British people and highlighting the role – and presence - of one heroic Glasgow airport baggage handler as a metaphor for Britain's resilience in the face of terrorist attack.

And it was a speech which emphasised Mr. Brown's approach as prime minister: willing to work across party political boundaries, offering a new politics as part of a centre-left political consensus.

Gordon Brown referred to the new global challenges – economic competition, terrorism and security, climate change, the pressures of balancing work and family life. He made clear his constitutional priorities – restating the reform package announced to Parliament in the summer and his commitment to an elected House of Lords.

But the policy detail of the speech focussed on education, health and crime. It was here, in the policy substance, that the continuity with the approach taken in recent years was clearest. Although there was no explicit reference to use of the private sector in the provision of public services – a change from the Tony Blair years – there was no suggestion of going back to monolithic public service provision. Even where the prime minister threatened to replace failing hospital cleaning contractors, this was couched in terms of ending the contract not ending contract cleaning.

In his approach to public services he articulated the message of reform – rejecting the “one size fits all,” take-it or leave-it model of public service provision and emphasising instead the importance of “personalisation” and ensuring that services are tailored to the needs of the individual. On education he specifically mentioned the expansion of specialist, trust and academy schools and one-on-one tuition. On health, he spoke of choice and made multiple references to an NHS “personal to you.”

Earlier this year, in the run-up to the Labour leadership and deputy leadership election, some commentators from Left and Right speculated that the Labour Party was about to vacate the centre ground of British politics, see the end of New Labour and the return of ‘traditional’ Labour.

Today's speech should finally end such talk. There has been a change in style, but in the substance there is continuity too.

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PRIME MINISTER GORDON BROWN'S KEY NOTE SPEECH TO THE LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE, 24 SEPTEMBER 2007

Key points:

Education

- One-to-one tuition will be available for 300,000 primary school children in maths and English; Secondary school pupils will have a personal tutor
- Five hours a week of sport will be made available for children
- Free education from nursery at three years old through to 18

Welfare and employment

- The link between the state pension and earnings will be restored
- Twelve months of maternity leave with nine months paid leave will be made available
- From next week the minimum wage will be raised to £5.52 an hour, with four days paid public holidays guaranteed

Crime

- The Government will build new youth centres - £670m will be invested in this programme
- There will be five year sentences for carrying a gun
- Stores that sell alcohol to underage drinkers could have their licences revoked

Environment

- The Government is assessing whether the 60 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2050 is sufficient

Health

- The National Health Service must also be a personal health service
- GP hours will be made more patient friendly, opening up opportunities to see a GP near patients' place of work as well as their homes
- Walk-in centres and medical services at pharmacies will be expanded
- There will be new funds for every hospital should tackle MRSA and C Difficile
- Matrons will have powers to order cleaning
- Breast cancer screening will be extended by six years earlier and there will be a guarantee that a consultant can fast-track patients into treatment
- Colon cancer screening will be extended for those in their 70s
- A regular check-up will be made available on the NHS for every adult
- We should be the first generation which eliminates the scourges of tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, malaria - and HIV/AIDS

Technology

- Dr. Tanya Byron has been asked to look at how families can make the most of the opportunities new technology gives them while protecting children from harmful material; her findings are expected to be published by March 2008.

Science

- £15bn funding will be provided for medical research