

*Mark Seddon*

## A *Logos* Conversation with *Tribune* Editor Mark Seddon

***Before going further, perhaps you could share a bit of your political background and career with our audience.***

Well, I joined the Labour Party at the tender age of fifteen as a schoolboy. I came from a very conservative background—my father was a serving officer in the British Army and both he and my mother were, and still are, members of the Conservative Party. Both sets of Grandparents were on the right and my uncle was an officer in his local Conservative Association. So my first instincts, I guess, were to rebel. I was sent away to school as my parents were often posted abroad and it was while I was there that I met a local retired farm worker who had helped set up the National Union of Agricultural and Allied Workers Union at the turn of the last century. His name was Mr. Elijah and very influential he was too. I joined the local Labour Party and went to my first big political meeting where the floor was stolen by a young Welsh firebrand called Neil Kinnock, who went on to become a leader of the Labour Party. As a student I was a fiery radical too—I was elected president of my Students' Union during the year of the great Miners' Strike in Britain in 1984. I spent a good deal of that year helping the miners and their families, going on picket lines and almost losing my job as the right tried to get rid of me—unsuccessfully—for all of the help we were then giving the National Union of Mineworkers.

After leaving university, where I studied International Relations and made good friends amongst fellow students from the PLO, the ANC and SWAPO, I moved to London. There I worked as a political lobbyist before becoming editor of *Tribune* at the tender age of thirty. I thought I would only be here for three or four years, but it has fast become a decade. In 1997—the year of Labour's landslide—I stood for election to Labour's ruling National Executive Committee, coming top of the poll in the first real challenge to Tony Blair and his "Third Way." I lost my seat a year later, regained it and have been a thorn in Blair's side ever since!

***Perhaps the vision of Iraq is different from England: what do you see as the principle reasons for the English decision to back the United States?***

The principle reason for backing the United States over Iraq was that Tony Blair believed President Bush and the Iraqi exiles when they said that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. This is how Blair also persuaded the bulk of his MPs and popular opinion—at one stage claiming that Saddam’s weapons could even hit British military bases in Cyprus. Blair told us at Labour’s NEC that Britain could have an influence over the United States and that a successful campaign against Saddam would allow for the “Roadmap for Peace” to be given full support in Israel/Palestine. He vehemently opposed all three of my resolutions on the NEC over Iraq—including the one that called for a second United Nations resolution before any action was taken.

***Many people have asked how someone like Tony Blair, a man whose— shall we say—quality of mind differs so profoundly from that of our president, could find himself enmeshed in this kind of war? What do you make of this?***

Blair is intelligent and a smooth operator, but he lacks depth and hinterland. His great success has been to cow the Labour Party, the cabinet and his parliamentary party into believing that he only he can win elections. Having dumbed down political debate deliberately, there are very few opportunities to confront him politically on issues such as Iraq. Blair genuinely believed the WMD claim; he also believed, I think, that Bush could be persuaded into the “liberal interventionism” so beloved by him (Blair) and Clinton. He simply did not get the measure of the neo- cons, or even attempt to try and understand their agenda. Blair by nature avoids personal conflict and likes to be loved. He will have been deeply affected by the warmth showered on him by President Bush after September 11th and I believe admires those who are more powerful and wealthy than he is—hence his astonishingly craven attitude that now damages him more than anything else.

***We have heard a great deal about the emergence of a new anti-Semitism in western Europe. Does this apply to England?***

There is little evidence of a rise in anti-Semitism in Britain, but plenty of evidence of Islamophobia, which is becoming very serious indeed. The Far Right British National Party is expected to make major gains in the forthcoming European and local elections—and it runs on an openly racist

ticket. However, at another level the pro-Israel lobby in Britain is certainly on the defensive and is losing influence rapidly as Sharon's extremism causes moderate Jews intense embarrassment.

***Fifty-two diplomats have now, more or less, censured the foreign policy pursued by Tony Blair: isn't this a remarkable situation?***

The letter from fifty-two retired diplomats was unprecedented, although they were subsequently dismissed as the "camel corps," by some around Tony Blair. The point is that the ex-diplomats were also speaking for their colleagues still in the Foreign Office, and recently the Foreign Office has begun leaking like a sieve. The Foreign Office has long experience of the Arab world and is appalled by the miscalculations around the war and the occupation. Tony Blair's footloose support for Bush and Sharon over the latter's promise to withdraw from Gaza, while allowing settlements to remain in the West Bank and Israeli control over the bulk of the area drove these same ex-diplomats and current diplomats to despair.

***These have been disastrous times for the United Nations the nightmare began with the bald-faced lying of our secretary of state, Colin Powell, before the world tribunal and the perceived impotence of this institution in bringing about an alternative policy on Iraq. How does the English left view the United Nations and how would you envision its role in thinking about a new brand of foreign policy?***

I recall that Colin Powell was a commanding officer at the time of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, which doesn't make him complicit but raises sharp questions over his judgment during the aftermath of the Cally trial. The UN is as potent as its members wish it to be—and without it, there would have been no arms inspectors in Iraq and no opportunity for those opposed to the coming war to put their case as France did. The UN has had its successes, most notably in East Timor and now in Liberia, but Iraq was no high water mark for the organization. The left in Britain is instinctively supportive of the UN, but would argue for more democracy and accountability—opening up the Security Council for instance to new members, sanctions against those countries that refuse to sign up to the new International Court of Justice and giving more power to the UN General Assembly.

***Much is often said about the foreign policy of Tony Blair. We in the United States, however, know very little about his domestic policy. How would you describe it?***

Tony Blair's domestic policy is broadly a soft neo-liberalism. We now have a minimum wage and some basic rights at work, but Britain lags well behind other European countries and Blair has sought to block a great deal of progressive reforming legislation from the European Union. And domestic policy is increasingly illiberal, especially when it comes to issues around asylum and immigration. The New Labour years have to some extent been an extension of the Thatcher years, although there is not the mass unemployment of the 1980s. To an extent Blair has been lucky with the economy, but much of its recent success can probably be laid at the door of his chancellor, Gordon Brown—who takes the long view just as Blair takes the short view.

***Progressives in the United States have long been faced with choosing between the “lesser of two evils”: what should the English electorate do in the next election assuming that the choice is between Tony Blair and the conservatives?***

“The lesser of two evils” is a disappointing argument for progressives the world over—because it has us all simply as spectators when we can make a difference. Look at the Howard Dean campaign, for instance. It is possible, of course, that Blair may not be leader of the Labour Party come the general election, or that the conservative opposition could contrive to be the “get out of Iraq” party. That said, I will be voting Labour, because in politics nothing stands still—and I expect things to change within the Labour Party in the post-Blair era.

***How difficult is it for you to remain in the Labor Party? What future do you see for the Labor Party?***

So yes, it has been very difficult to stay active in the Labour Party since under Blair it has become increasingly dysfunctional. The left, for its part, has failed to come up with popular alternatives in Britain so not all blame can be

Mark Seddon

heaped on Blair and “New Labour.” Certainly if the Labour Party keeps on this political trajectory it will cease to be a political force within five years.

***When Logos and your magazine, Tribune, decided to exchange links you mentioned that this might be of particular importance given the charge of “anti-Americanism” so often directed against critics of the Iraqi war and the foreign policy of the Bush administration. How devastating is that charge now and how real is anti-Americanism?***

Anti-Americanism is a cheap jibe thrown at the left and peace campaigners by those on the right on both sides of the Atlantic. Now it is true that some on the left have become lazy and have come to see anything from America as inherently bad news—they forget the post-war role that America has played in Europe, your country’s frequent generosity during times of economic crisis, your written constitution, tough monopoly and corporation rules and much else besides. But I think such people are largely a minority. Some commentators on both sides of the Atlantic on the right and who are apologists for the neo-cons such as Mark Steyn and Michael Gove from the *Times of London* argue that to criticize American foreign policy is tantamount to a heretical attack on all things American. Few people fall for this extreme, almost fascistic view however.

At *Tribune*, we are proud to have a number of columnists and contributors from the United States, including Professor Norman Birnbaum of Georgetown University and Professor John Mason of Paterson University. I am very please that we have developed links with *Logos*, the Socialist Scholars Conference, the Democratic Socialists of America and a number of your labor unions. As for me, one day I should like to come and live work in New England! I am very pro-American; it is just that I have problems with market fundamentalists and neo-imperialists whether in America, Britain or anywhere else.

***Mark Seddon is the editor of Tribune and an elected member of the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee. Seddonzq1@aol.com***