

The Long March

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January 2024

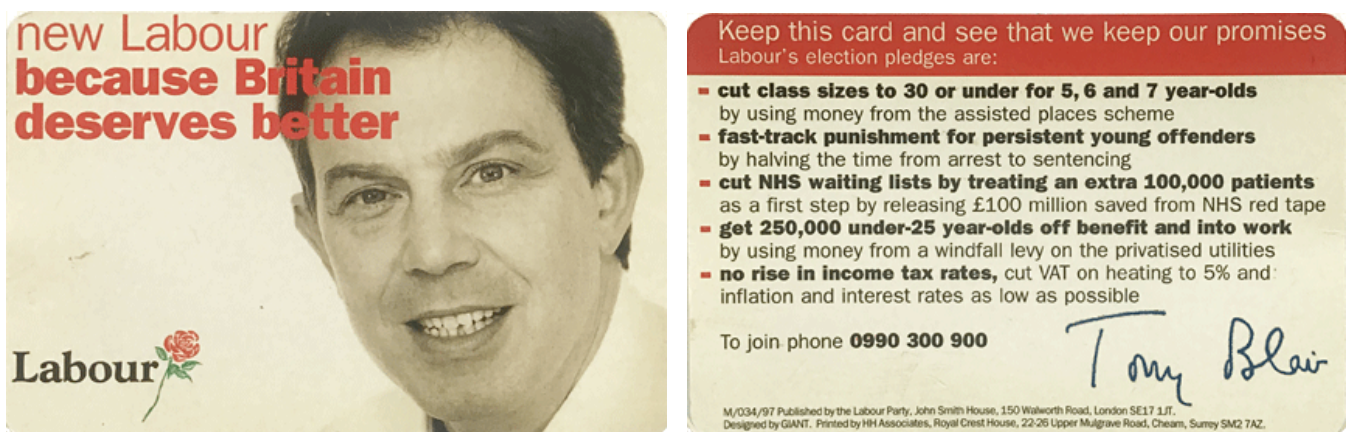
'While Xi Jinping was resetting the world order through his Belt and Road initiative and Vladimir Putin was recreating the Russian empire by annexing Georgia and Crimea, we were arguing over gender-neutral toilets.'

Writing last year in *The Times*, social commentator Matthew Syed cannily captured in this sentence the 'long march' challenge for western democracies.

Citizens in these countries recognise increasingly that the electoral cycle is a potent enemy when it comes to addressing the long-term global issues we face: climate degradation, turbulent national borders, migration of peoples from south to north, ageing populations, pressures on health care, housing and transport.

Politicians of all colours, urged on by 24/7 social media which recognises no boundaries, focus on short-term ticket items which court favour with voters who shout loudest. Political leaders can be forgiven for so doing: even the mid-term for them is a distant horizon.

When Tony Blair came into office in 1997, advisers had been busily shaping 'the project' in the preceding years. The famous pledge card laid out a confident two-term agenda:



By January 2025, all signs are a Labour government will be embarking on its own two-term tenure: 'time for change' and 'cost of living' will be the pivots upon which a victory or defeat will turn. As the Brexit decision showed, no vote is certain. You

never quite know what might occur in the weeks running up to a November 2024 (my guess) poll, occurring at the same time as the US presidential election.

Turning to the electorally low-profile issue that is education, what might we expect this year to hear boldly set out by the Shadow Secretary of State for Education? And let us remember that the UK is set to remain the sixth largest world economy up to 2040: we have national funds if we choose to deploy them.

I'd volunteer the following five pledges, to be consolidated in the nation's schools over 8 - 10 years in office:

1. **cut Reception class sizes to under 20**, with a forensic focus on improving speech and language for all children in the early years
2. **set an unequivocal target that most children aged 11 will read in line with their actual age**, with excellent teacher training to realise that goal
3. **change the plight of 'the forgotten third'**, with reshaping how English and mathematics are taught and examined at 16+
4. **redesign how special education needs are identified and funded**, focused on the *needs* of children rather than the *wants* of parents
5. secure a healthier balance between professional support and accountability, with a radical refresh of national inspection.

Leaders in schools and trusts will always have their own pre-occupations to add to the list: budgets, teacher recruitment, curriculum content, assessment, pupil wellbeing, 'closing the gap'.

At the same time, let us have some optimistic long-termism and investment in the nation's children and young people to underpin the Labour vision - and please let's hear about it soon.

The guest column and guest essay for January offer further perspectives on future thinking about schools.

Roy Blatchford's latest book is [The A - Z of Great Classrooms](#), published by John Catt.