

A Study on Tony Blair's Policies towards European Union with Reference to 1998 UK'S EU Presidency

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Abstract: *This paper mainly explains about Tony Blair's policies towards European Union with reference to 1998 UK's EU Presidency. The Labour party under the leadership of Tony Blair came to power in UK after the 1997 UK General election. Before the election, the Labour Party introduced the pro-European policy strategy goals in its 1997 UK general election manifesto. This was whole heartedly supported by the UK people in the 1997 general election and the Labour Party won the election by a huge majority of votes in its Labour party history. This election gave new direction to the UK's EU policy. In this scenario, in 1998, the UK government occupied the EU presidency. Under Tony Blair's premiership, the Labour government's 1998 EU presidency was considered as an important step in the EU-UK relations. The agenda of the 1998 UK presidency of EU was different from the agenda of 1992 UK presidency. During John Major government's 1992 EU presidency, the major challenges before them was with regard to financial issues, the negotiation of the Danish opt-outs and other issues. But Major's government somehow succeeded in settling all these issues. But, its achievements during 1992 EU presidency were insignificant when compared to Tony Blair's New Labour government's 1998 EU presidency. The study of the 1998 UK's EU presidency plays an important role to better understand the EU-UK relations during Tony Blair's period.*

Keywords: European Union, United Kingdom, Tony Blair, Labour party, 1998 EU Presidency, Euro, Enlargement policy

I. INTRODUCTION

After its membership to EU, the UK had not actively engaged in the European Union policy making and policy implementation process. From 1973 to 1996, the various UK Prime Ministers followed a negative and skeptical attitude towards the EU activities and policy initiatives. None of the UK Prime Ministers showed any special interest to improve its relations with EU. In this scenario, Tony Blair's Labour government made a huge difference in the EU-UK relationship. His pro-European policy initiatives made a huge change in the EU-UK relations. His Labour government from the very beginning made clear to the UK citizens that their government would take more pro-active and constructive role in the EU policy making and various developmental programmes. This initiative was whole heartedly supported by the other EU member countries. In short, when compared to the previous Conservative Party governments, the Labour Party under Tony Blair's premiership, took a positive attitude towards the European integration process after its historic win in the 1997 election.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

In the light of above, the proposed research aims to understand the following:

- To understand the reason behind Tony Blair's involvement in EU.
- To analyze as to what extent UK differs from other EU member states in EU Politics.
- To understand the reasons and motives of UK whole participating in EU projects.
- Internal debate in EU regarding Tony Blair's role in various policies.
- Impact of Tony Blair's policies on EU and its wider ramification.

1.2 Methodology

This work on 'A Study on Tony Blair's policies towards European Union with reference to 1998 UK's EU Presidency' is basically an analytical work. The proposed study will to a large extent rely on primary sources including official, Government documents and publications. The study also proposes to hold interviews with the concerned policy makers and discussions with the experts. The study will also critically examine the secondary sources available on the subject matter such as books, journals, periodicals magazines and tertiary sources such as newspapers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Review of literature is an important stage of research as it provides the researcher an overview of what has been done and what is being done. In this background, there exist several works pertaining to the subject matter of the research that could be usefully employed in the research. In this study mentioned a few.

Christian Schwinger, (2007), in his book on **Britain, Germany and the Future of the European Union (PALGRAVE MACMILLAN Publications, New York,)** has analyzed the role played by Britain in the European Union. And the author also analyzed the Britain and European integration, the Britain under Tony Blair's premiership and also discussed Blair's European policies in different fields.

Alistair Jones, (2007), in his book **Britain and the European Union (Politics Study Guides), (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh,)** analyzed the history of the EU, its institutions and policies. The author also analyzed the British applications, the referendum on membership and Tony Blair's premiership.

III. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1 Tony Blair's Policies towards European Union

The Labour Party's victory in the 1997 UK general election led to the growth of new hopes and aspirations in the UK foreign policy towards the EU. The election gave a new direction to the UK's foreign policy and also at the same time, it gave a new impetus to the UK's EU policy. It also changed the attitude and strategy of UK towards EU. It gave a new opportunity to develop a greater political, economic, cultural and security cooperation between the UK and EU member countries. It is assessed that during Tony Blair's Labour government's rule, the UK's perspective on EU changed for many reasons. In this context, the study of 1998 UK's EU Presidency plays a pivotal role to understand Tony Blair's policies towards European Union.

3.2 1998 UK'S EU Presidency

After New Labour government headed by Tony Blair took over the EU presidency in 1998, his government announced its policy objectives during its term as EU presidency. This included:

- To preside over the key decisions to launch the Single currency. In this regard, Tony Blair himself took a proactive approach towards joining EU's single currency proposal namely, Euro currency;
- To inaugurate the enlargement process and to carry out the requisite internal EU policy reforms.
- To pursue an agenda of policy reform aiming at employability and competitiveness.
- To strengthen EU efforts to combat crime and enhance environmental protection.
- To continue the process of establishing the UK as an influential and constructive partner in the EU.
- To involve the British people in the presidency.

From the above, we can understand that Tony Blair's New Labour government followed a more constructive European policy under its EU presidency. The New Labour government also followed a positive and more practical approach towards EU policies and programmes during its EU presidency. During the 1998 UK presidency, the EU officials showed much interest in dealing important issues. The media also played a crucial role. Much progress was achieved with Justice and Home Affairs and also in Coreper 1 and its related councils. The success was also achieved in the ratification of the Europol Convention. However, the New Labour government failed to put up UK at the Centre of EU's policy decisions.

With regard to the EU enlargement policy, the New Labour government took many measures and also encouraged entry of new member countries into the EU. With regard to the EU policy on Home Affairs, a major progress was achieved under the New Labour government's EU presidency. With regard to the EU policy on Environmental Protection, the major progress was achieved during Tony Blair's tenure was the implementation of Kyoto Protocol agreement. This was an

international agreement which aimed to reduce the carbon dioxide emissions to the environment. With regard to the EU policies on Economic Reforms and Competitiveness, the New Labour government took several measures to improve and restore the competitiveness of the EU member countries. With regard to the EU economic reforms, the New Labour government implemented monetary and fiscal policies to control the inflation, unemployment, GDP.

The Policy measures were also undertaken with regard to price control, energy, and fiscal and external deficits in the EU member countries. The UK Chancellor of Exchequer Gordon Brown announced a reforms policy in Luxembourg Employment Summit in November 1997. In this initiative, he was greatly supported by the former BP chairman Sir David Simon. Later, he was appointed as a Minister for Competitiveness in Europe. During his term as a minister, he had made many changes in the working of EU on global economic issues and crisis. A European Council meeting was held at Cardiff in June 1998 by the heads of states of the EU member countries to discuss the sustained and durable growth in promoting job creation. This was aimed at improving the capacity for innovation in the member countries.

Under the UK presidency, British Prime Minister Tony Blair always wanted to put UK at the Centre of EU policy making process. The British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook and all other Foreign and Commonwealth officials worked hard to select the priority areas in which the UK can play a leadership role in the EU. Finally, they selected two areas in which the UK can play a key role in EU.

Firstly, in the defence field, in which the EU had not yet evolved much and not had any independent defence system, to give security to the EU member countries. The European Security and Defence Policy was initiated by the EU to take necessary action in peace keeping operations, conflict resolution and also towards strengthening international security. It also plays an important and integral part of EU's approach towards crisis management in the EU member countries. But, at the same time, the UK had complete faith in the U.S.A.'s NATO system for its defence.

Secondly, with regard to bilateral relations, the EU made investment dialogues and trade agreements with other countries of the world to promote open investments and free capital movements from one country to another country without having any trade restrictions. These investment dialogues allow member countries to raise their concerns about the investment conditions in other country and to seek proper solutions to promote mutually beneficial investment flows.

Along with these measures, many other reforms were introduced on EU policy making. In this regard, resources were allocated to cabinet office of the European Secretariat to co-ordinate the European policy programmes. For giving the EU a strong defence identity, the diplomatic relations were developed between the UK and France in December 1998 at St. Malo. This meeting played an important role in developing a strong defence co-operation between the EU member countries over various issues.

Until the June 2001 general election, the Labour Party government was concentrated more on five European policy areas. In this respect, the Common Security and Defence Policy was formed to empower the EU to conduct peace keeping operations and to mobilize a rapid action military force. This also involved the deployment of military or civilian missions to preserve peace, prevent conflict and strengthen international security in accordance with the principles of UN Charter. Tony Blair's New Labour government took many measures to give security and military assistance to the EU member countries during conflict situations. This idea was formed in support to the EU foreign policy.

With regard to the policies on Justice and Home Affairs, the New Labour government followed a more practical approach in reviewing the different policy proposals and didn't see them from the prism of sovereignty. The New Labour government introduced several treaty agreements to maintain a co-operative justice system in the EU. The Amsterdam Treaty introduced the Schengen agreements in the EU. This agreement mainly deals with the abolition of the countries' borders and to build Europe without any borders. The agreement gave way to the free movement between the European Countries. Initially, this proposal was propounded by France and Germany and a detailed framework was developed in the Fontainebleau European Council meeting in June 17, 1984. Finally, an agreement was signed in June 14, 1985. But UK was not a part of this agreement. The Schengen agreement played an important role in shaping the Justice and Home Affairs agenda at Tampere Summit of 1999. This agreement also helped in the development of Police and Judicial Cooperation in April 2000.

With regard to the EU enlargement, the New Labour government supported the process. The New Labour government also gave importance to reform to Common Agriculture Policy. The CAP was extended to newly joined Central and Eastern European countries. On the other hand, the EU was facing major budgetary problems. As a result, the New Labour government proposed to reform the Agricultural policies of EU. Later, the Nice Treaty was agreed upon to discuss further reforms in the CAP.

IV. CONCLUSION

Overall, the 1998 UK Presidency achieved a major milestone in the EU-UK relations. During the term of six months, they negotiated many highly complicated issues. Among them the major issues include, the incorporation of Schengen agreement and the removal of Gibraltar obstacle. During this period, the UK government also took the initiative to implement the Action Plan regarding the development of the Amsterdam Treaty's area of Freedom, Security and Justice. Along with this, major success also achieved in terms of Single Market related issues, environmental policy decisions, Auto-oils agreement, research and development, and food hygiene agreement with U.S.A.

Under the 1998 UK Presidency major success was achieved in most of the EU policy areas and the development of EU member countries. Prime Minister Tony Blair transformed UK's relationship with the EU in a new direction. During its period of 22 weeks in the first half of 1998, the New Labour government presided over 45 European Council meetings, eight informal meetings with ministers of the EU member countries, 65 Coreper 1 and 2 meetings and over 1,500 working group sessions. During its six months term, it had organized EU-Japanese meetings in January, the European Conference in March, the EU-Asia meeting in April and also EU-US summit meetings in May. Along with these, many bilateral meetings and missions were conducted during this period.

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