

## Tony Blair and the Welfare State 1997-2007

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### Abstract

The Welfare State was at the heart of the Labour Party and social democratic politics since the Second World War. The collective and universal provision of welfare services, social security, health, education and housing would guard against poverty, promote equality and underpin citizenship and social cohesion. Labour's social democrats believed that welfare should be provided by the state, paid for out of taxation and administered as a public service. It should not be left to the market. This article tries to discuss the Welfare State during the reign of Tony Blair from 1997 till 2007.

Keywords: Tony Blair, Welfare State, 1997-2007, education, and social services.

### الملخص

كانت دولة الرفاهية في قلب سياسات حزب العمل البريطاني وسياساته الديمقراطية الاجتماعية منذ الحرب العالمية الثانية. وعمل على توفير الخدمات الاجتماعية والضمان الاجتماعي والصحة والتعليم والإسكان الجماعي وأن يحمي الفقراء ويعزز المساواة ويعزز المواطنة والتماسك الاجتماعي. ويرى الديمقراطيون الاجتماعيون من حزب العمال أن الرعاية ينبغي أن توفرها الدولة، وتدفع مقابلها الضرائب، وتدار كنخدمة عامة. نحاول من خلال هذه المقالة مناقشة دولة الرفاهية خلال عهد توني بلير من عام 1997 حتى عام 2007.

الكلمات المفتاحية: توني بلير، دولة الرفاهية، 1997-2007، التعليم والخدمات الاجتماعية.

### Résumé :

L'État providence a été au cœur du parti travailliste et de la politique socio-démocrate depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale. La fourniture collective et universelle des services sociaux, de la sécurité sociale, de la santé, l'éducation et le logement permettaient

de lutter contre la pauvreté, et consister à promouvoir l'égalité et renforcer la citoyenneté et la cohésion sociale. Les sociaux-démocrates travaillistes pensaient que le bien-être devait être assuré par l'Etat, payé par les impôts et administré comme un service public. Il ne devrait pas être laissé au marché. Cet article tente de discuter de l'État providence sous le règne de Tony Blair de 1997 à 2007.

**Mots-clés:** Tony Blair, L'État providence, 1997-2007, éducation, et services sociaux.

### Introduction

Much of what was called the welfare state was established under the Attlee administration: the National Health Service, the National Insurance and National Assistance schemes, council housing, local authority children's departments and underpinning it all, the commitment to full employment. The welfare state was the 1945 Labour government's most significant achievement. To be sure, the Labour's post-war social policy built on the Liberal government's social security reforms before the First World War, the extension of these by the National government in the 1930s and the work of the wartime coalition in areas such as education.

The Conservative reforms to the welfare state were aimed at making work more attractive than welfare. This was done by tightening entitlements, cutting benefit rates and piloting welfare to work including the Project Work pilot. Following the ambitions of the Commission on Social Justice, the Labour moved to put work first on its agenda for welfare reform. But Labour set an agenda for welfare beyond Thatcherism one that combined a commitment to poverty reduction and social inclusion with one to equality and social justice.<sup>1</sup>

The Labour Party was elected to government in May 1997 on the back of an electoral landslide with 43.2 per cent of the votes, the Conservatives 30.7 per cent their worst since 1832 and the Liberal Democrats 16.8 per cent. In terms of seats, it took 418 seats and had a majority of 179, larger than Attlee's victory. The Conservatives with just 165 seats had their worst showing since 1906. They failed to win a single seat in either Scotland or Wales. The Liberal Democrats with 46 MPs had the best third Party return since Lloyd George's Liberals in 1929.<sup>2</sup>

The support for the Party increased in almost all social categories. It rose from 28 to 47 per cent among white collar workers and from 39 to 54 per cent among skilled workers. It rose in all age groups except those 65 and over where the fall was only

marginal, it increased considerably among young and first-time voters. In 1992, 35 per cent of first-time voters had voted Conservative and 40 per cent Labour. The figures were 19 and 57 per cent respectively.<sup>3</sup>

The gender gap closed with 44 per cent of both men and women supporting the Party.<sup>4</sup> The Labour's support among ethnic minorities became even stronger. It took 85 per cent of Asian and black votes; almost 19 in every 20 black voters voted Labour naturally, the Labour Party performed very well in its core areas: in Wales, for example, 34 of the 40 seats were won; in Scotland, 56 out of 72. The Labour Party also made considerable progress in southern England, continuing the trend away from the old North-south divides.<sup>5</sup>

The Labour's return to power after 18 years in opposition was a cause for a great celebration both within the Party and outside it. After Labour's defeat in 1979, no one expected its return again to the office. The heavy defeats of 1983 and 1987 Left a great deal of ground to make up.

Few of the ministers Blair appointed had even junior ministerial experience; none had previously served in the Cabinet. Neither Blair nor Brown had even been MPs at the time of the previous Labour government. Mostly Blair's first Cabinet members being appointed to the ministries were in the opposition shadow government. Gordon Brown had an incontrovertible claim to the Exchequer, David Blunkett had been promised Education and the claims of Robin Cook to the Foreign Office and Jack Straw to the Home Office were almost as strong. John Prescott, who as deputy leader, had been a key ally in Blair's New Labour project, was designated Deputy Prime Minister and put in charge of a new super-ministry, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR).<sup>6</sup>

Peter Mandelson became Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office.

Notably, the Cabinet contained five women, far more than any of its predecessors and a reflection of the positive policies that the Party embraced earlier in the decade. Margaret Beckett, the most senior, went to Trade and Industry while in one of the few appointments of a Leftist figure to the Cabinet, Clare Short was appointed Secretary for International Development. However, given that there were 101 women Labour MPs.<sup>7</sup>

Tony Blair served as Prime Minister for three successive parliamentary terms 1997, 2001 and 2005 until his resignation on 27 June 2007. In fact, the 2001 election confirmed the success of New Labour's electoral strategy of welding a coalition of working and middle-class voters. Moreover, the voter in the middle still felt closer to the Labour Party than the Conservatives Party.<sup>8</sup>

The Labour's 413 seats in the House of Commons, a majority of 167 over all other parties, were won with nearly 41 per cent of the popular vote. The Conservatives went

nowhere. Rooted on just over 31 per cent of votes, they made one gain overall to 166 seats. The Liberal Democrats continued to increase their presence from 46 to 52 in Parliament taking 18 per cent of the vote.<sup>9</sup>

The result of the 2005 election showed that the Party continued to attract voters from across the social spectrum, despite the shadow of the Iraq war hanging overhead. But the 2005 result gave the first indications that those Middle-class voters appeared less willing to support the Party. The Labour Party also lost support from lower middle-class voters and the skilled working class. At the 2005 election, the main beneficiaries of Labour's losses were the Liberal Democrats.<sup>10</sup>

### **1. The New Labour and the Welfare State**

The Labour introduced welfare-to-work,<sup>11</sup> and Frank Field was appointed Minister for Welfare Reform in May 1997 with a brief to conduct a radical survey of the whole subject. Plans to restore the pensions-earnings as opposed to prices, which led to a significant increase in the incomes of aged persons, were dropped when the tax implications became clear.

Its achievements in cutting waiting lists were overshadowed in the winter of 1999-2000 by increasing public attention on waiting times, where its record was far less impressive. By 2001, there was a real sense that opportunities had been missed during the first term, and that there now needed to be a stronger steer on public service reform and the delivery of targets for improvement.

The welfare state was at the heart of the Labour Party and social democratic politics since the Second World War. The collective and universal provision of welfare services, social security, health, education and housing would guard against poverty, promote equality and underpin citizenship and social cohesion. Labour's social democrats believed that welfare should be provided by the state, paid for out of taxation and administered as a public service. It should not be left to the market.

Much of what was called the welfare state was established under the Attlee administration: the National Health Service, the National Insurance and National Assistance schemes, council housing, local authority children's departments and underpinning it all, the commitment to full employment. The welfare state was the 1945 Labour government's most significant achievement. To be sure, the Labour's post-war social policy built on the Liberal government's social security reforms before the First World War, the extension of these by the National government in the 1930s and the work of the

wartime coalition in areas such as education.

The Conservative reforms to the welfare state were aimed at making work more attractive than welfare. This was done by tightening entitlements, cutting benefit rates and piloting welfare to work including the Project Work pilot. Following the ambitions of the Commission on Social Justice, the Labour moved to put work first on its agenda for welfare reform. But Labour set an agenda for welfare beyond Thatcherism one that combined a commitment to poverty reduction and social inclusion with one to equality and social justice.<sup>12</sup>

### **1.2. The New Labour and Social Services**

Central to the Labour's anti-poverty drive was to get the unemployed and the economically inactive those outside the Labour market back into work.<sup>13</sup> Poverty would be addressed through the Labour market not the benefit system. This required Labour to rethink social security entitlements. The review of entitlements was part of its wider rights and responsibilities agenda. The Labour modernisers argued that post-war social democracy had neglected the responsibilities of those in receipt of state help. Instead, the government should promote a clearer balance between the duties of the state to provide welfare and the duties of the welfare recipient in return for the right to public support.<sup>14</sup>

This meant tightening employment tests for those claiming social security and in return, providing help in looking for and getting work. This was an agenda for welfare reform that drew heavily on the ideas of the New Democrats in the United States during Bill Clinton years.<sup>15</sup>

The Labour's New Deal for the unemployed was unveiled in opposition and formed a major plank of the 1997 manifesto. Once in government, a series of New Deal programmes were launched covering, first, 18 to 24 year olds, then the long-term unemployed, the over 50s, lone parents, disabled people and partners of the unemployed. By 2001, most of those not in work or full-time education were in some kind of New Deal programme.

The point of the New Deal was to offer support, not just cash benefits, for people not in work. After six months, the unemployed were allocated a personal adviser whose job was to provide assistance with an intensive job search.<sup>16</sup> This 'gateway' period included soft skills like punctuality,<sup>17</sup> appearance and communication. At the end of the fourth month, those individuals who did not find jobs were offered one of four options: full-time education and training for 12 months without loss of benefit for those without basic

education; a six-month voluntary sector job; a job on an environmental task force or a subsidized job plus one day week training. If an individual refused one of these options, sanctions apply, including loss of benefits.

The employment tests differed in severity between New Deal groups. For young people, the tests were tough and kick in after six months. Sanctions were applied for those who refused jobs or who left one of the New Deal options without good cause. The New Deal for lone parents and the disabled were in effect voluntary, though in both cases the government put forward policies to engage those on long-term disability benefits and to tighten the rules covering these groups. In his 2004 pre-budget statement, Gordon Brown announced a £40 return to work credit.<sup>18</sup>

The following February, Alan Johnson, then Work and Pensions Minister, announced that incapacity benefit paid to 2.7 million people in 2004 would be scrapped for new claimants and replaced by new separate allowances for those whose impairments prevented them from taking work.<sup>19</sup>

The New Deal, then, combined a reform of entitlements with services to help people not in work to find employment. The Labour Party also followed Ellwood's ideas in attempting to 'make work pay'.<sup>20</sup> This meant two things. First, the incoming government introduced a minimum wage. The starting rate of £3.60 and the exemption of young people from its main provisions did little to win support from sceptical trade unions, or from equally sceptical employers who feared that governments telling them how much to pay their workers would increase costs and increase unemployment, the minimum wage was raised to £4.10 at the start of the second term and was set to increase to £5.35 in October 2006.<sup>21</sup>

The second aspect of the Labour government's policies to 'make work pay' was the introduction of tax credits paid to working families on lower wages. Launched in the autumn of 1999, the working families' tax credit replaced the Conservative government's in-work benefit family credit. A disabled person's tax credit was introduced at the same time. In 2001, Gordon Brown announced the replacement of the married couples' allowance with a new children's tax credit. The scheme was also extended to families without children or disabilities as the working tax credit.<sup>22</sup>

The Labour's policies on making work pay were designed first and foremost to remove disincentives to take jobs. But these Labour market reforms also helped with the government's anti-poverty drive, especially for families with dependent children. Key to the government's welfare-to work policies was to provide childcare support to working parents as part of a broader national childcare strategy. This strategy, launched in 1998, aimed to

create an entitlement for free part-time nursery places for 3 and 4 year olds.

By 2004, the National Audit Office reported that 96,000 new pre-school places had been created and that the government was on target to reach 100,000. However, the Audit Office noted significant regional variations in pre-school places and called for more support for child-minders.<sup>23</sup> The government's fiscal policies were integral to this national childcare strategy, with a childcare allowance included in the working families' tax credit and above inflation increased to child benefit paid directly to families with dependent children.

Children, especially from low-income families living in deprived communities, were the target of the government's attentions, in particular through the 'Sure Start programme'.<sup>24</sup> The latter was often viewed as one of the new Labour policies and resembled the US Head Start programme. The aim was to provide better local services for families with young children through more innovative and joined-up' provision. Parents themselves were involved as Sure Start partners in an attempt to ensure that new services meet the needs of families.

How far these policies were successful in reducing poverty, promoting social inclusion and bringing about social justice? Since 1997, helped by a buoyant and well managed economy, Britain had enjoyed high levels of employment, rising incomes and better standards of living.

By the end of the Labour's second term, the overall rate of economic activity stood at around 75 per cent. There was an important debate about how effective the government's welfare-to-work programme was in reducing unemployment compared to the boost to employment from economic growth. While the balance between active Labour market policies and economic growth was always difficult to call, since 1997 the numbers working had increased by just over two million to 28.5 million.

Estimates of the New Deal's contribution to this figure were below one million.<sup>25</sup> The costs of the New Deal were largely covered by the existing social security payments to the unemployed. In many cases, the unemployed found work with or without the New Deal since 1997 the economy had been growing; vacancies were nation-wide; and while a significant minority of young people in the New Deal had had problems with basic numeracy and literacy, the majority clearly had the skills and ability to find work.

The relative success of the New Deal faced a problem of recruitment. While the number of New Deal programmes rose, the size and cost of the main New Deal for Young Persons decreased, largely due to lack of demand and the higher proportion of individuals leaving the programme.<sup>26</sup>

This problem was the key for Labour in its third term in power. Since 1997, rates of economic inactivity had not fallen to anywhere near the same degree as unemployment. Since the mid-1990s, numbers of those who were economically inactive but wanted to work had fallen by a seventh. As shown by the New Policy Institute's 2004 report on *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion*, while the number of unemployed for two years or more and claiming out-of work benefits had fallen sharply, in 2004, only 70,000 were long-term unemployed claimants compared to 440,000 in 1995.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3. The New Labour and the National Health Service

The Conservative policy-makers sought to raise standards and efficiency in the health service through an internal market between the gatekeepers of the NHS, the GPs and the main providers of health care, the hospitals. The internal market gave greater managerial and financial freedom to the newly established trust hospitals, as well as to the GPs that became fund holders, but not the ordinary GPs.<sup>28</sup>

The Labour Party came to power promising to abolish the internal market. In practice, the new government reformed it. These reforms were set out in the 1997 white paper *The New NHS: Modern, Dependable*.<sup>29</sup> The central feature of these reforms was the abolition of GP fund-holding and the setting up of primary care trusts (PCT's).<sup>30</sup> Primary care budgets were given to the new PCTs finally established in 2001 under the 1997 National Health Service Act which brought together GPs and other local health professionals. PCTs had responsibility for the sourcing of health care and local health promotion.

The idea was that a collaborative network of local health professionals working with hospitals and other providers to offer health care replaced the competitive internal market. The government's reforms to the commissioning of health and social care more broadly were extended with the establishment of care trusts under the 2001 Health and Social Care Act.

In 2000 the government also published its *NHS Plan: A Plan for Investment, a Plan for Reform*.<sup>31</sup> The plan listed a set of government targets that detailed how the Chancellor saw the allocation of all the extra money he was handing out. Targets included waiting times for accident and emergency departments, for a range of operations and to see a GP. It set targets for beds, doctors, nurses and other health workers.<sup>32</sup>

The creation of foundation hospitals was the 2003 Health and Social Care Act paving the way for the creation of hospitals was passed with the government's massive majority cut to 17 amid fears that the new-style trusts would lead to a two-tier health service and that foundation hospitals were a cloak for further privatization of the NHS.<sup>33</sup>



#### 1.4. The New Labour and Education

As in health, the Conservative policies for education saw the introduction of an internal market whereby schools were encouraged to compete for pupils whose parents were given far greater freedom to choose the school they wanted for their child. Resources were allocated to these choices and schools were given devolved powers local management of schools or (LMS) to manage these resources.<sup>34</sup>

Schools were also encouraged to opt out of local education authority control and be funded directly by central government and to specialize in particular areas of the curriculum. These policies inevitably undermined the role of local government in schooling. But, the Conservatives were not content to let markets raise standards in schools. The 1988 Education Act saw the introduction of a national curriculum and the start of a regime of national testing.

The Labour government's first step in government was to abolish the Assisted Places Scheme,<sup>35</sup> a Conservative policy designed to help bright pupils from poorer backgrounds attend independent schools. As noted above, Labour also pleased its supporters in the 1998 Schools Standards and Framework Act by bringing grant-maintained schools back into the local government fold as foundation schools, though LMS meant that this was not as significant as it might once had been. Indeed, subsequent Labour legislation reinforced local school governance, for example through the policy of earned autonomy in the 2002 Education Act.<sup>36</sup>

The Labour Party retained the basic architecture of Conservative reforms to schooling. Parents could choose the school for their children due to the competition for limited places. Schools continued to compete for pupils and be funded on a largely per capita basis. Local management of schools was kept as were the National Curriculum, national testing and the revamped schools inspectorate, as well as its controversial head, Chris Woodhead.<sup>37</sup>

During the Labour's first term in power, the government grabbed whatever powers were available to David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and invented some new ones, such as a new schools standards unit to deliver government policy through local intervention in schools and local education authorities.<sup>38</sup>

In schooling, these interventions largely concerned teaching, assessment, the curriculum and class sizes in primary schools, the introduction of national literacy and numeracy hours and their associated targets. The government made it abundantly clear that

it did not think that all teachers and not all schools were reaching the standards it expected for them.

The Labour's educational policies did not end with what was taught in schools. Teachers, governors and local education authorities had to accept a far greater role for the private sector in the building and running of schools, as well as measures such as the introduction of performance-related pay.

During the Labour Party's first term, the government established 'education action zones'<sup>39</sup> in which parents, local businesses and voluntary groups could experiment in schooling free from national regulations under the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act, was the way forward for New Labour as it approached its second term in power.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, *Welfare State Transformations Comparative Perspectives* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Seldon and Dennis Kavanagh, *The Blair Effect 2001-5* (UK: Cambridge University Press 2005), 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Flavio Romano, *Clinton and Blair The political economy of the Third Way* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 94.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Seldon, *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Williams, "Who's Making UK Foreign Policy?". *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 80.5 (2004): 911-929. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3569478>, 07.

<sup>8</sup> Seldon, *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007*, 587.

<sup>9</sup> *The Hutchinson Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> David Runciman, *The Politics Of Good Intentions History, Fear And Hypocrisy In The New World Order* (UK: Princeton University Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>11</sup> Welfare-to-work is a programme introduced in Great Britain in June 2011. It was the flagship welfare-to-work scheme of the 2010-2015 UK coalition government. Under the Work Programme the task of getting the long-term unemployed into work is outsourced to a range of public sector, private sector and third sector organisations. David O'Reilly, *The New Progressive Dilemma Australia and Tony Blair's Legacy* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 140.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, *Welfare State Transformations Comparative Perspectives* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Brown, *Stakeholder Housing A Third Way* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>17</sup> Seeleib-Kaiser, *Welfare State Transformations Comparative Perspectives*, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Terrence Casey, *The Blair Legacy Politics, Policy, Governance, and Foreign Affairs* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 162.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Powell, *Modernising the welfare state The Blair legacy* (UK: The Policy Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>20</sup> Seldon, *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007*, 416.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Mark Tewdwr., Jones, *The Planning Polity Planning, Government and the Policy Process* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005), 44.

<sup>22</sup> Seeleib-Kaiser, *Welfare State Transformations Comparative Perspectives*, 28.

<sup>23</sup> Seldon, *Blair's Britain, 1997-2007*, 425.

<sup>24</sup> The Sure Start programme was a UK Government area-based initiative, announced in 1998 by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, applying primarily in England with slightly different versions in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The initiative originated from HM Treasury, with the aim of

"giving children the best possible start in life" through improvement of childcare, early education, health and family support, with an emphasis on outreach and community development.

[https:// www. Britannica.com/ Sure\\_Start](https://www.Britannica.com/Sure_Start).

<sup>25</sup> Seldon, *Blair's Britain*, 1997-2007, 220.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Powell, *Modernising the welfare state The Blair legacy*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Powell, *Modernising the welfare state The Blair legacy*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130814142233/http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/doh/newnhs/forward.htm>.

<sup>30</sup> David Richards, *New Labour and the Civil Service Reconstituting the Westminster Model* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 190.

<sup>31</sup> [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications/publicationspolicyandguidance/dh\\_4002960](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+www.dh.gov.uk/en/publicationsandstatistics/publications/publicationspolicyandguidance/dh_4002960).

<sup>32</sup> Powell, *Modernising the welfare state The Blair legacy*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Steve Ludlam and Martin. J. Smith, *Governing as New Labour Policy and Politics under Blair* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 134.

<sup>35</sup> The Assisted Places Scheme was established in the UK by the Conservative government in 1980. Children who were eligible were provided with free or subsidised places to select fee-paying independent schools - if they were able to score within the top 10-15% of applicants in the school's entrance examination. By 1985, the scheme catered for some 6,000 students per year. The scheme, to a degree, replicated the effect of the direct grant grammar schools which had operated between 1945 and 1976. Between 1981 and 1997 an estimated 80,000 children participated in the scheme, costing a total of just over £800 million. In 1981, 4,185 pupils gained assisted places. By 1997 there were some 34,000 pupils and 355 schools in this scheme. [https:// www. Britannica.com/ Assisted\\_Places\\_Scheme](https://www.Britannica.com/Assisted_Places_Scheme).

<sup>36</sup> The Education Act 2002 (c.32) is an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom that gave schools greater autonomy to implement experimental teaching methods. [https:// www. Britannica.com/Education\\_Act\\_2002](https://www.Britannica.com/Education_Act_2002).

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Foster, *British Government in Crisis or The Third English Revolution* (USA: Hart Publishing C/O, 2005), 170.

<sup>38</sup> Ludlam and J. Smith, *Governing as New Labour Policy and Politics under Blair*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> Education Action Zone, a term used for specially designated areas in England that are considered for special assistance in increasing the quality or availability of educational opportunities, instituted by the New Labour party after 1997. [https:// www. Britannica.com/ EAZ](https://www.Britannica.com/EAZ)