

## **A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MARGARET THATCHER AND TONY BLAIR'S POLICIES TOWARDS EUROPEAN UNION**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

This paper mainly explains Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's governments' policies towards the European Union. When the Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher came to power in Britain after 1979, she wanted to have good, friendly relations with European Union countries. In the early years of her rule, she did not face any major obstacles from the European Union countries. In the latter part of her rule, Thatcher took a more aggressive policy towards the European Union. On the other hand, the Labour Party under the leadership of Tony Blair came to power in the 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 wholeheartedly 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 a new direction to the UK's EU policy. In this context, the study of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's governments' policies towards the European Union plays an important role in understanding the EU-UK relations from 1979 to 2007.

**Key Words:** Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, Conservative Party, Labour Party, Single European Act, Exchange Rate Mechanism, Euro, Enlargement policy

### **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 1979, all the UK Prime Ministers followed a negative attitude towards the EU activities and policy initiatives. After James Callaghan's premiership, the Conservative Party leader, Margaret Thatcher, became the Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1979. She followed a more aggressive policy towards the European Union than earlier British Prime Ministers. She initiated a creative policy change towards the European Community. On the other hand, after John Major's premiership, the Labour Party leader Tony Blair became the Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1997. 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 a more proactive and constructive role in the EU policy-making and various developmental programmes. This initiative was wholeheartedly supported by the other EU member countries.

### **RATIONALE OF THE STUDY:**

The proposed research will focus on the policy and perspectives of the UK during Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's premiership. Stress here is on the UK's policy towards the EU. Other issues, such as internal policy, unless war is ranked, will not be taken into consideration. Secondly, the study aims to understand British foreign policy only in the context of the EU and does not deal exclusively with its foreign policy.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:**

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

- To understand the reason behind Margaret and Tony Blair's involvement in the EU.
- To analyze as to what extent UK differs from other EU member states in EU Politics.
- Internal debate in the EU regarding Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's roles in various EU policies.
- Impact of Margaret Thatcher's and Tony Blair's policies on the EU and its wider ramifications.

## **HYPOTHESIS:**

- 1) Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair sought to change the role of the UK in the EU.
- 2) Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's policy represented an ambivalent attitude towards the EU, supporting the EU where it suited national interest and deviating from the general EU members' position when it did not suit the perceived national interest.
- 3) Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's policy perspective has had an imprint on the UK's policy towards the EU and has made it difficult for successors to deviate from it.

## **METHODOLOGY:**

This work on 'A Comparative study of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's policies towards European Union' is basically an analytical work. The proposed study will largely rely on primary sources, including official Government documents and publications. The study also proposes to hold interviews with the concerned policymakers 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.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW:**

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

**Christian Schwinger (2007)**, in his book on **Britain, Germany and the Future of the European Union (Palgrave Macmillan Publications, New York)**, has analysed the role played by Britain in the European Union. And the author also analysed Britain and European integration, Britain under Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair's premiership and also discussed Thatcher and 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)**, analysed the history of the EU, its institutions and policies. The author also analysed the British applications, the referendum on membership, Margaret Thatcher's, and Tony Blair's premierships.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:**

### **MARGARET THATCHER'S POLICIES TOWARDS EUROPEAN UNION:**

During her rule as a British Prime Minister, Thatcher took a more pragmatic approach towards Britain's relationship with the European Union. Before becoming a Prime Minister, Thatcher was a strong supporter of Britain's membership to European Economic Community on economic grounds. But after she became British Prime Minister, she fully defended her country's national interest. Her policy was completely based on intergovernmental and free market models of the European Community.

She wanted to have good, friendly relations with European Community member countries. When compared to the Labour government's European policy, Thatcher followed a more pro-European policy. Thatcher was more concerned about Britain's role in the European Community. As an opposition party leader, Thatcher supported a "Yes" vote campaign in the 1975 referendum. In the early years of her rule, she continued the previous government's policy towards the European Community. Like Callaghan, Thatcher also gave importance to Britain's special relationship with the USA. She gave full support to the then U.S. President Jimmy Carter's stand against Russia's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Later, from 1981 to 1989, she maintained good, friendly relations with Ronald Reagan's government.

She had faced many domestic political problems in Britain's European Community relations. In the early years of her rule, she did not face any major obstacles from the European Community member countries. In the latter part of her rule, Thatcher took a more aggressive policy towards European Community member countries. This led to a strong opposition within her own party, from the then Foreign Secretary Peter Carrington and Spokesperson on Foreign Affairs in the House of Commons, Ian Gilmour. Thatcher, in her role as Prime Minister, gave utmost importance to her country's national interest.

Overall, during her rule, Thatcher took a more pragmatic approach towards Britain's relationship with the European Community. During the 1970s, the Conservative Party was more pro-European than the Labour Party. Her policy was completely based on intergovernmental and free market models of the European Community.

### **TONY BLAIR'S POLICIES TOWARDS EUROPEAN UNION:**

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 a more proactive and constructive role in the EU policy-making and various developmental programmes. This initiative was wholeheartedly 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 history. This election gave a new direction to the UK's EU policy.

The ten years of the Labour government's European policy goals are considered as bipartisan, completion of the single market, enlargement, reform of the Common Agricultural policy and retention of the Veto over matters of national interest. A key distinction for the Blair government was its large parliamentary majority, which enabled policy goals to be pursued constructively and more predictably.

Tony Blair's first term provided several important opportunities to put the manifesto commitments into practice. The first was in the EU's intergovernmental conference (IGC) on treaty reform that finally approved in the form of the Amsterdam treaty. The broad impression of the British Presidency was positive. But the government was unable to occupy a central position in respect of the EU's policy agenda. Specifically, the launch of the final

stage of European Monetary Union (EMU), at a special European council on 1<sup>st</sup> May, was an important moment in the EU's history. However, the UK's non-participation underlined the government's difficulties in playing a leading role in the EU. The launch of the enlargement process was more in line with government policy, an objective on which there was bipartisan agreement within the UK. The Labour government adopted a more pragmatic approach to participation within the EU on implementing the Kyoto agreement on controlling greenhouse gases. And the most important distinctive contribution came in the context of economic reform and competitiveness, which was made strong input in the Luxembourg employment summit in November 1997.

The first term of the Blair government was most successful. Progress was achieved in leading reform with support for the Lisbon strategy. The commitment to a referendum on joining the single currency did not materialise because of the Treasury's ongoing evaluation. Progress was achieved on all the detailed 1997 manifesto commitments. The promotion of European security and defence policy arising from the 1998 St.Malo bilateral initiative with France was a concrete demonstration of a more constructive policy, which placed a British imprint on the EU. Two rounds of treaty reform (Amsterdam and Nice) were concluded by the Labour government with no major isolation.

The second term was more fractious with partner states because of divisions within the EU that were opened up by the Iraq invasion. Although a major protagonist in the divisions, the UK was never isolated in the way that it had been in foreign policy beforehand, for instance, in supporting the US bombing of Libya. It was difficult to identify the major achievement to economic reform in the EU. Instead, it was trying to advance the Lisbon strategy and relevant legislation on the single market and competitiveness in EU politics. The 2003 recommendation against joining the Euro was an important step of the Labour government on EU policy that went against its manifesto commitment.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Overall, Margaret Thatcher, during her term as British Prime Minister, followed a more pragmatic approach towards European Union countries. Her policies revolve around the Single Market, British Budget Question, and the reform of CAP. But when compared to earlier British Prime Ministers, especially Edward Heath, Thatcher gave a new direction to the EU-UK relations by signing the SEA and by joining the ERM. On the other hand, Tony Blair's Labour Party ruled the UK for ten years with three election victories. In the entire Labour Party's election history, Blair was considered the most successful political leader, and he ruled the UK for a decade. Before he assumed office, the Labour Party was in a very miserable condition. It was he who transformed the Labour Party into a ruthless vote-winning machine. During his ten years of Labour Party's rule, many political leaders and his cabinet colleagues considered him a modern, conservative, actor, winner, restless and a tragic leader.

Nevertheless, compared to Margaret Thatcher's European policy, there has been reasonable achievement of the Labour government's manifesto objectives in its European policy. The UK was less isolated in the EU. But the real area of weakness for the Labour government has been in respect of building domestic consensus on its European policies. Tony Blair's own effort to change the domestic public opinion's perception of the benefits of European integration was unsuccessful. Economic competitiveness, climate change, internal security, and combating global poverty: these and other objectives of the government require active complementary action by the EU. The Labour government's efforts to explain the situation to the domestic electorate have been very weak. The Labour government has failed to create a

new consensus over European policy. The Labour government has delivered a more constructive European policy, but built on weak domestic foundations.

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