

Reflecting on John Smith's political legacy

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On May 12th, 1994 John Smith, then the leader of the Labour Party, died suddenly and tragically at the young age of 55. **Wyn Grant** reflects on his political legacy and what might have been had things turned out differently.



The twentieth anniversary of the tragically early death of John Smith in his mid-fifties is an opportunity to reflect on what might have happened if he had survived and gone on to become prime minister. This is not a straightforward task, as his political legacy is in some respects ambiguous and people can project on to it what they want to.

If John Smith had continued to lead the Labour Party into the 1997 general election, Labour would still have won because the Conservative Party was internally divided, which voters dislike, beset by problems of 'sleaze' and perceived to be intellectually exhausted. Voters perceived that public services, particularly in education and health, were deteriorating because of a lack of investment and the protection of such services was at the heart of John Smith's political philosophy.

Tony Blair was desperate to reach out to 'middle England', to *Daily Mail* readers, in order to put Labour's election victory beyond doubt. In doing so, he may well have moved New Labour to the right of the median voter. John Smith's desire to run the Labour Party in an inclusive way, and reach out to the party's left wing, would have prevented him from travelling so far rightwards. Indeed, his relatively modest proposals for tax increases when he was shadow chancellor at the time of the 1992 election damaged Labour in the south of England and may have been a decisive factor in the election result.

If Tony Blair had won the election with a smaller majority, he might have been willing to bring Liberals into his government. They might then have demanded a more serious commitment to proportional representation which could potentially have transformed the political landscape. It is difficult to envisage John Smith entering into such an agreement, however.

Tony Blair was seen as a charismatic figure, but arguably this led to a triumph of style over substance. Smith was about substance if he was about anything. His political style was one of solid reassurance based on deeply rooted principles. Harold Wilson once said that he tried to convey a family doctor image as prime minister and Smith fitted into that mould, although others have seen him as a provincial bank manager before the banks' reputation was damaged. In other words, he was about probity, about firm but fair decision-making.

John Smith had a deep commitment to the European Union, rebelling against the party in the 1970s. Would he have gone so far as to take Britain into the euro? He would not have faced two constraints that prevented Tony Blair from exercising his preference for euro membership. First, Blair had developed a close relationship with the Murdoch media empire which was opposed to Britain joining the euro. Second, he was constrained by Gordon Brown's opposition. Smith would not have had to cope with the problem of Brown thinking that the leadership had been unfairly denied him.

However, that does not mean that Smith would have proceeded to join. He was nothing if not cautious; indeed one of the criticisms of his political style was that he was too cautious. He would have weighed up the merits and disadvantages of carefully and might have decided that there were too many uncertainties to do anything but defer a decision.

The boldest decision of the 1997 Labour Government was to give operational independence to the Bank of England to determine interest rates. Once again Smith's caution might have stood in the way of such a bold move which many commentators think, on balance, was the right one.

The most striking difference between Blair and Smith as prime ministers might have been in the field of foreign policy. It is difficult to see Smith signing up as enthusiastically as Blair to a liberal internationalist foreign policy or developing such a close personal relationship with George W. Bush. He would have been much more reluctant to commit Britain to intervention on Iraq.

Blair's commitment to military intervention was in part in consequence of the success of the early interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone and the plaudits that this brought him. However, it also flowed from Blair's religious convictions and his tendency to view the world in terms of a Manichaeian struggle between good and evil. Smith was also devoutly religious, but arguably in a more sophisticated way than Blair.

If Smith had won with a smaller majority than Blair in 1997, would he have faced defeat in 2001? Probably not, although Michael Portillo might well have retained his seat at Enfield and become Conservative leader rather than undertaking railway journeys for television. However, Labour might have lost in 2005 and it would then have been the Conservatives who would have been in office during the global financial crisis and taken some of the blame that went to Labour.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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