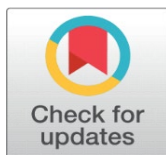


# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE UK'S 1998 EU PRESIDENCY DURING TONY BLAIR'S PERIOD

Balasubramanya P. S.<sup>1</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College, Bantwal Kamaje, Jodumarga Post, Bantwal Taluk, D.K. Dist. Pin: 574 219. Affiliated To Mangalore University



## Corresponding Author

Balasubramanya P. S.,

[subbapaniyala@gmail.com](mailto:subbapaniyala@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper mainly analyses UK's 1998 EU Presidency during Tony Blair's period. 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. Under Tony Blair's premiership, the Labour government's 1998 EU presidency was considered an important step in EU-UK relations. The agenda of the 1998 UK presidency of the EU was different from the agenda of the 1992 UK presidency. During John Major's government's 1992 EU presidency, the major challenges before them were 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 the 1992 EU presidency were insignificant when compared to Tony Blair's New Labour government's 1998 EU presidency. Against this backdrop, the study of the 1998 UK EU presidency plays an important role in better understanding the EU-UK relations during Tony Blair's period.

**Keywords:** European Union, United Kingdom, Tony Blair, Labour party, 1998 EU Presidency

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After its membership to the EU in 1973, the UK had not actively engaged in the European Union policy-making and policy implementation process. From 1973 to 1996, the previous all UK Prime Ministers followed a negative and sceptical attitude towards EU activities and policy initiatives. But Tony Blair's pro-European policy initiatives made a huge change in EU-UK relations. His Labour government take a more proactive and constructive role in the EU policy-making and implementation process. This was wholeheartedly supported by the other EU member countries. During this period, the New Labour government occupied the 1998 EU presidency and this was considered an important step in developing EU-UK relations.

## 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 the EU.
- To analyze to what extent the UK differs from other EU member states in EU Politics.

- To understand the reasons and motives for UK whole participating in EU projects.
- Internal debate in the EU regarding Tony Blair's role in various policies.

#### **METHODOLOGY:**

This work on 'An Assessment of the UK'S 1998 EU Presidency during Tony Blair's Period' is an analytical work and the proposed study will to a large extent rely on primary sources including official, Government documents and publications. 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.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW:**

The Review of 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, several works about the subject matter of the research could be usefully employed in the research. 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 Britain and European integration, Britain under Tony Blair's premiership, and 1998 UK's EU presidency 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, Tony Blair's premiership and 1998 UK's EU presidency.

## **3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:**

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

The Labour Party's victory in the 1997 UK general 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 changed the attitude and strategy of the UK towards the EU and gave a new opportunity to develop greater political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation between the UK and EU member countries. Among them, the UK's 1998 EU presidency plays an important role.

### **1998 UK'S EU PRESIDENCY:**

After the 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 president. This includes

- To preside over the key decisions to launch the Single currency namely, the 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.

In this regard, Blair's New Labour government followed a more constructive European policy under its 1998 EU presidency by following a positive and more practical approach towards EU policies and programs during its EU presidency. During its term, EU officials showed much interest in dealing with important issues. And the media also played an important role during its term. During this period, Policy measures were also undertaken regarding price control, energy, and fiscal and external deficits in the EU member countries. During his term, Blair wanted to put the UK at the Centre of the EU policy-making process. Against this backdrop, 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 the EU.

Firstly, the defence field in the EU had not yet evolved much and not had any independent defence system, to give security to the EU member countries. So, the European Security and Defence Policy were initiated by the EU to take necessary action in peacekeeping operations and conflict resolution. It plays an important and integral part in the EU's approach

towards crisis management in the EU member countries. Tony Blair's New Labour government took many measures to give security and military assistance to the EU member countries during conflict situations.

Secondly in 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. The investment dialogues allow member countries to raise their concerns about the investment conditions in other countries and to seek proper solutions to promote mutually beneficial investment flows.

Regarding EU enlargement, the New Labour government supported the process by encouraging the entry of new member countries into the EU. About the EU policy on Justice and Home Affairs, major progress was achieved during its EU presidency. Major progress was achieved in Justice and Home Affairs policies and in Coreper 1. Regarding the policies on Justice and Home Affairs, the New Labour government followed a more practical approach in reviewing the different policy proposals. The New Labour government introduced several agreements to maintain a cooperative justice system in the EU.

The success was achieved in the ratification of the Europol Convention. Regarding the EU policy on Environmental Protection, the major progress achieved during Tony Blair's EU presidency was the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol agreement. This was an international agreement that aimed to reduce carbon dioxide emissions to the environment. Regarding 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. Regarding the EU economic reforms, the New Labour government implemented monetary and fiscal policies to control inflation, unemployment, and GDP.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

During UK's 1998 EU Presidency, Blair's New Labour government transformed UK's relationship with the EU in a new direction. During its period of 22 weeks, the 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. It also organized EU-Japanese meetings, the European Conference, the EU-Asia meeting and the EU-US summit meetings. Along with these, many bilateral meetings were conducted during this period. Overall, the 1998 UK Presidency achieved a major milestone in EU-UK relations. During this period, it also negotiated many highly complicated issues. This includes the incorporation of the Schengen agreement and the removal of Gibraltar obstacles. It also took the initiative to implement the Action Plan regarding the Amsterdam Treaty's area of Freedom, Security, and Justice. The major success was also achieved in terms of the Single Market, environmental policy decisions, Auto-oils agreement, research and development, and food hygiene agreement with the U.S.A.

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#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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