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BRITAIN

## REFORM OF PUBLIC SERVICES

# Blair warns trade unions over private sector role

By Brian Groom, Political Editor

Tony Blair warned trade unions yesterday that they would have no veto over his plans for sweeping reforms of public services, which include an expanded role for private companies.

The prime minister, making clear public service reform was his top priority, said he wanted to work in partnership with public servants, and was prepared to adapt policy if necessary.

But he said it was "reform or bust" and warned bluntly: "I will not flinch from the decisions and changes to deliver better public services, no matter how much opposition."

The state of public services, such as health and education, was a key issue in the recent general election. But government proposals for greater private sector involvement have proved controversial with unions, public sector workers and the government's own rank-and-file MPs.

Mr Blair told an audience at a north London hospital: "It is a partnership for change: not a veto over it. Vested interests are not the public service ethos. A commitment to better public services is, and no vested interests can have a veto on reform."

Mr Blair said private sector involvement was only one part of the programme, introduced where it could contribute to a better service.

Despite his assurances, the GMB general union today launches a £250,000 (\$352,000)

advertising campaign in defence of public service, starting with advertisements in national newspapers. They depict a nurse and a "fat cat" businessman under the slogan: "Who do you trust to run public services?"

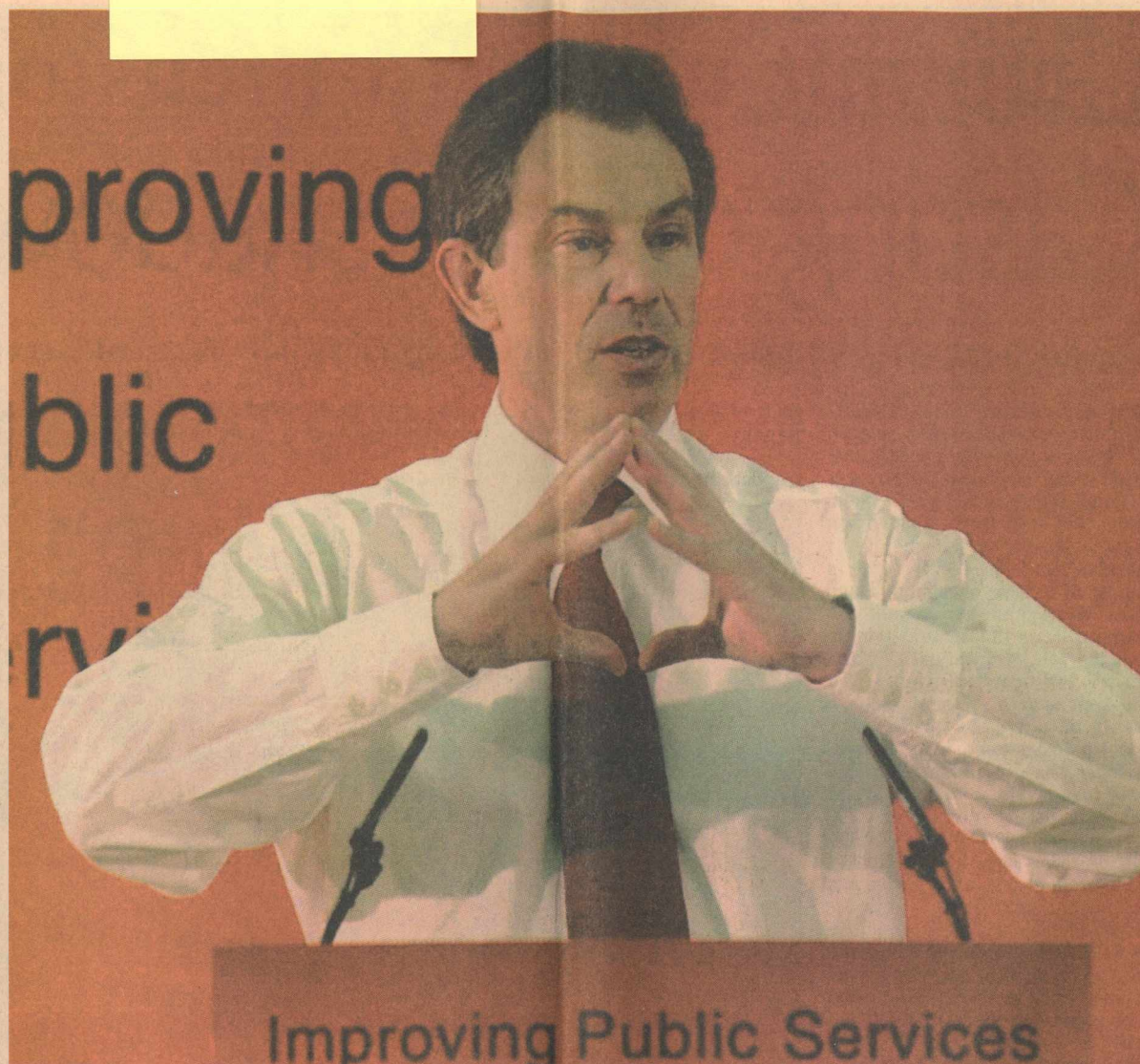
John Edmonds, the union's general secretary, said: "Public sector workers were scared that they were facing back door [indirect] privatisation. Today's speech has put paid to that threat - we are not looking at back-door privatisation but facing the prospect of ministers kicking down the front door and hurling privatisation on to the mat in front of us."

The union's executive will meet today to decide whether to cut its contribution to the Labour party by £250,000 as a protest.

Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, the public services union, said: "It is a shame that the prime minister does not listen to us, the people in the front line of public services delivery, but rather continues his romance with the private sector."

John Monks, general secretary of the Trades Union Congress - the independent association of unions - normally regarded as an ally of Mr Blair, said unions remained concerned about the "unspecific nature" of the government's plans for the private sector.

The Manufacturing Science and Finance union gave the speech a warmer welcome, warning the union movement not to give a "knee jerk reaction" to the proposals.



Tony Blair tells yesterday's audience he 'will not flinch' from the decisions and changes to deliver better public services Press Association

