

NEW LABOUR, THE HUNT FOR VALUES, AND A ROLLING NEWNESS

This is not intended to be a history of New Labour. Rather, as someone who worked as a policy wonk* for the Labour Party in opposition (under the leadership first of John Smith and subsequently of Tony Blair) I had a personal involvement in the growth of those ideas and of a political programme in the wake of the traumatic 1992 General Election loss. In the lead-up to the 1997 General Election a new politics emerged which was a change primarily in political style as well as in political content. There was a change in content: so as not to frighten the electorate the word “socialism” took a back seat but it was the withdrawal of a commitment to equality which was the principal victim of the ideological cull. The methodological change was one which took campaigning seriously. In 1992 there had been no efficient canvassing of many of the key marginal seats; by 1997 these canvasses had taken place and the Party’s work under John Smith on the boundary changes was very significant in drawing up new constituencies which Labour could win.

It was obvious to a group of us – policy wonks working for the Party’s front bench in Parliament, as opposed to the apparatchik’s in the Millbank Tower who were concerned entirely with the Press – that we lacked an ideological base under Blair with which the population could identify immediately. The genius of Thatcherism was that a simple ideology had been created such that one could know automatically what the Iron Lady’s views (or those who worked her gears) would be even before she spoke. Blair lacked such an ideology: indeed he revelled in the absence of such an ideology, by way of contrast with the Tories who were by that time so tarred by their inflexible dogma (Poll Tax anyone?) that an absence of ideology sounded electorally attractive. And so we created a group which discussed precious ideas such as autonomy, equality (few takers on that one, I seem to recall) and so on. I still wish this work had been taken further.

The concern with “newness” is, of course, irritating now: we should have ditched it once it had done its work as convincing those suspicious of us that we would return to what the Press sought to present as the “bad old days”. The search for values, more than ten years after we convened that discussion group, is still on. The chance to develop a real radicalism has been lost because there is not now time to think.

Here is not the place to consider my own views on the minutiae of the Blair years – why did Gordon Brown target disability rights first? why did we launch an illegal war with Iraq? – but rather to consider what are the bases for the politics of a “radical centre” or a “third way”: both meaningful expressions, in my view. My own preferences are suggested in the section on **socialism**.

**A “wonk”, an Americanism, is a person who works on policy matters, writes speeches, and develops position papers. One who is described as being a wonk has to be concerned, it always seemed to me, as being only one vowel away from ignominy.*

The following discussion is culled structurally from AS Hudson, *Towards a Just Society* (1999).

Structuring the political project

There is a need for the left to identify the nature of their project for this century. The fall of the credibility of state socialism stemming from events in central and eastern Europe, and the rise of global capitalism, have encouraged the democratic left to seek a new language in the centre of politics. However, this new centrism, identified in the context of the legal system in *Radical Centrism* above, is not the ideologically moribund centre of the Cold War dialectic of left and right. Rather, it is an attempted synthesis of rightist and leftist concepts - welfare socialism with monetarist economic management, tough law and order policy with a concern for social cohesion, individual rights with communal responsibility. This Part aims to map some of the principal tenets of this “third way”, primarily by suggesting the most appropriate principles for such an emerging ideology in the context of justice policy.

There are a number of voguish concepts (globalisation, reflexivity, connexity, communication and chaos) ranged alongside some staples of leftist thought (such as equality, and hegemony). In the particular context of the justice system, as a *political project*, these concepts have a very particular correlation. The common thread is an observation of a changing world mixed with a desire to root out social injustice. First, it is important to consider the reason why a third way is being sought now, at the end of the 1990’s.

Movements and change

Change is unavoidable because the world has changed drastically, almost violently, in the past 15 years. The globalisation of economic power reduces the ability of national government to restructure internal economic relationships. There has been a revolution in information technology for education, leisure and the workplace. At the same time society has become hyper-complex - as new power bases emerge: fragmenting traditional power structures. Employment relationships too have been de-traditionalised over the past 30 years. Work and career patterns are no longer inter-generational and linear. Many of the staples of manufacturing industry and the coal industry had all but collapsed, and mass unemployment and non-unionised, part-time labour have become a central feature of the new economic landscape. The accepted social ‘truths’ of our society (of the family, of work for young people, of geographic communities) have been destabilised by the modernist,

monetarist project. There is a disenchantment among the “jilted generation”¹ which now sees no place for itself in the social and political landscape of previous generations.

The adopted challenge for the new Labour government has been to generate a new politics which captures the spirit of these fundamental changes in society. Blair’s insistence on the re-drafting of Clause 4 of the Labour Party’s constitution was a necessary declaration of the ordinary values of the socialist project. Core socialist values of equality of opportunity, social justice, and democratic empowerment are as vital now as they ever have been. They are the core around which the political philosophy of the new labourism is being constructed. These core values must be objectives as well as principles. The important task for the centre-left is to achieve greater social justice and not just espouse it, to realise equality of opportunity not just to preach it, to deliver democratic empowerment not just promise it. The new constitution must not just recognise these as principles but work towards them as goals.

The real danger facing the Labour government is its current lack of an identified political ideology, rather a vacuum stands instead of an underpinning political theory. That said, the Labour Party does not need "a big idea" for the nineties. There are no apparent, big ideas left to be uncovered, other than to fuse old core beliefs with the new context. Rather it needs to rediscover what it has in its fundamental concepts which people will understand to be true and with which they will identify. As Cohen put it:²

“What the [New] Right did is no proof of what the Left should do. It is nevertheless extremely suggestive. It tells against looking for a "big new idea". That is anyway a futile endeavour, since you do not land a new idea as a result of angling for one, in the wide sea of intellectual possibility. New ideas standardly come from attempts to solve problems by which old ideas are stumped.”

There is a need for re-moulding political theoretical ideas now because of the changes which have hit British society:- the globalisation of economics, the hyper-complexity of social institutions, the collapse of manufacturing industry, the advent of mass unemployment as a long-term feature, the destabilisation of social myths by the modernist project, the information technology revolution, the newly all-pervasive disenchantment of the jilted generation.

The importance of the project from political theoretical terms is that it will draw on both traditions to create a new, synthesised whole. The new thinking of the new Labour is really a dialectics of the past. Rejecting the uselessness of both state socialism and market-based laissez-faire economics, this necessarily dialectical process must draw from what has not been discredited in both of these systems. In starting this new strain of thought, Labour has been forced into a position where it has developed its headline ideas before an intelligent base has been able to grow to feed the specific policy and ideological processes that accompany a political party going through a process of fundamental reform.

¹ Prodigy, *The Jilted Generation* (XL Recordings, 199).

² See G.A. Cohen "Labour and Social Justice", *New Left Review* 207, Sept/Oct 1994.

New Labourism, new values

To give birth to the New Labourism, the Labour Party must glean what it can from its socialist values and isolate those elements which can be translated to the new thinking.³ What is clear today, is that the Labour Party was never a socialist party on the fundamental Marxist-Leninist model.⁴ It only ever advocated the reform of economic and social mores to improve the lot of the working class in a capitalist society. However, many of the fundamental values which informed the nascent Labour Party were of a Marxist or socialist kind. Notions of egalitarianism and emancipation from economic exploitation shared a common heritage with the Marxist project. As such, the social democratic aims of the Labour Party (never extending as far as the imposition of state socialism) grew out of a set of values relating to fairness which were comprehensible to the electorate.

However, in the Socialist project there was a morality which sat outside the economic base of Marxism. To locate in the values of socialists only economic values is to miss the emphasis on ideals which were to do with morality and social structures. Socialism has been engaged in a normative process which fleshed out values onto the bones of economic theory.⁵ In short, there has been an implicit development of ethics while talking explicitly about economics. Post-marxism, post-structuralism and critical theory have all been on their surface ontological programmes seeking to deconstruct the capitalist system and replace it with the Leftist project. This has resulted in what has been described by Habermas as the "welfare state compromise" of social democracy and Labourism. The issue here is whether the Left should release its hold on an intention to govern or to exert economic power and concentrate instead on being a moral code which aims solely to work for the redistribution of social goods.

The End of Old Values

The old myths of our society have been destabilised by the modernist project. One of the most important examples of this destabilisation process has been the dissolution of traditional "communities" where individuals and families lived around the workplace, shared communal facilities, communal values and communal aspirations. In seeking to erect a programme built on the concept of the community, the problem presents itself that such concepts no longer retain their traditional meaning nor does everyone understand them to mean the same thing.

³See G.A. Cohen "Labour and Social Justice", *New Left Review* 207, Sept/Oct 1994.

⁴See for a full exposition of this idea "Labourism and the English Genius" by Gregory Elliott.

⁵See Habermas, *New Left Review* 183, 1990. The issue here is whether the Left should release its hold on an intention to govern or to exert economic power and concentrate instead on being a moral code which aims solely to work for the redistribution of social goods.

This project still rumbles on. Habermas takes the postmodernists to task for suggesting that the modernist project has been completed. It is more accurate to suggest that different aspects of the modernist project are in different stages of development and perhaps that the deconstruction school has arrived to pull down those ideas which are either redundant because they belong to another time or which are redundant because they never had a valid claim to truth. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*,⁶ Habermas begins with the claims of the French post-structuralists that they have moved beyond philosophical subject and the concomitant need to return to reason understood as communicative action. This notion of the individual's role being replaced by communication bears a number of straightforward, definitional political complications when placed alongside agenda which seek to "empower the citizen".⁷ However, the debate needs to be assimilated to the work of a modern party of the Left attempting to reconstruct its intelligent base of ideas. The work of the modernisers, which continues outside the field of aesthetics in the forward march of technology and of the demands of the citizen.⁸ The focus of this book is on achieving social justice through legal and related systems.

Mapping the change

The New Labourism is left in the position where it is attempting to draw from a heritage that has been irredeemably altered in many respects, by market capitalism.⁹ What the New Labourism requires is an avowedly intellectual exercise which will create a reservoir of principle from which the movement can draw as it goes forward. There is a sensible suspicion of new ideas for new ideas' sake. The revelation that the Labour Party does not need "a big new idea" is the first reason for guarding against a junking of old ideas just because they are old ideas. However, the world has come to change with time. New Labourism must seize the tide of this change to carry the Party forward.

⁶ Habermas,

⁷Not least is the proximity of communicative action to the systems theories proposed by Talcott Parsons, and pursued by Niklas Luhmann, while being reviled by luminaries of the new left like Anthony Giddens. Discussing these issues in a new political language is essential if the centring of "discourse" as part of the debate is not to be mistaken for a displacement of the unfashionable "individual" from populist political discussion.

⁸ A political project, in the populist and the theoretical sense, needs to use both the tools of post-structuralism to disassemble the myths of past ideologies and also understand the work done by critical theory in suggesting new methods of enlightenment for the citizen. There has been, for too long, a separation on the Left between its thinkers, its political actors/activists, and its natural electorate. The New Right re-created conservatism when it married the active and intellectual parts of its personnel in the 1970's. That the results of this new ideology caused such economic and social disaster is due to the redundancy of the ideas from the outset and not to the programme itself.

⁹ Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London, Verso, 19..).

Society has become hyper-complex¹⁰. The socialist and social democratic agenda are trapped in the mindset of a time when central government could control society and provide solutions on its own. Systems theory has led us to one, new understanding: that power relations have splintered. Foucault's analysis of the location of power¹¹ recognises this splintering of the location of power. He locates power in culture too, which is perhaps too diverse a target for government and therefore also too broad a target for a workable political theory. What is important is the location of, for example, much economic power in unregulated financial institutions.¹² Unless politics understands the power that rests in the hands of QUANGO's and private sector organisations, it will be impossible to create an agenda which confers rights and assumes responsibilities. In the language of responsibility, it is necessary to locate the power and place obligations on the holders of powers rather than berating the disempowered citizen for a lack of moral exactitude. The role of law, as used by the citizen, will be to go where politics maybe cannot - to deal with the individual situation precisely.

There are two possibilities offered by the new technology. On the upside, public access to information will empower people who will be able to shape their own lives free of the strictures of public censorship and even of the demands of the workplace (in the case of those able to work from home). Alternatively, technology will create a Bladerunner future in which people will be frightened to emerge from their homes, in which people will be fed pap through a million different cables, and in which vast electronics corporations will come to wield enormous power.¹³

The truth is that either scenario is possible. What is certainly true is that technology offers vast educational and vocational opportunities. What is important is that Labour must begin to rethink the way in which it views society and the structure of educational norms. The acceleration of communications and televisual technology had already had profound effects on the modern world. The Gulf War was fought and observed with the use of advanced technology. The possibilities offered by the photo-copier and the fax made the revolutions in Eastern Europe possible as the samizdat newspapers replaced the usual communication by word of mouth of the activities of other protestors.¹⁴ The fax speeded up communications from weeks into seconds and created the momentum for the velvet revolutions. This speed has its effects on politics with the creation of 24 hour news coverage. The potential result is a world peopled by "dromomaniacs" (people who are the tools of technology that constantly overtakes them)¹⁵. Alternatively, individuals can become self-serving agents using this technology to further themselves: harnessing speed to facilitate growth.¹⁶ The

¹⁰See in respect of this change: Giddens, *New Statesman*; Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society*; etc

¹¹As found in the *History of Sexuality*

¹²See Gavyn Davies, *the Independent*

¹³ *New Media / Mediaologies*

¹⁴ Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, (Semiotext(e),).

¹⁵Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, (Semiotext(e),).

¹⁶ibid

effects of technology, on the meaning of individuality and the linguistics of communication, are altered by this radical termination of the power of speech and the pen.¹⁷

The relationships of international capital have moved the control of economic indicators, employment policy and so forth, beyond the scope of national government. We are in the third stage of international capital: we have moved from the capitalist system, to the nation state to the global marketplace where goods are produced and disseminated on a world-wide basis.¹⁸ The globalisation of power relations has made the development of international politics an essential aspect of the agenda of a political party that is organised round the nation state.

The 1990's have created a new indifference in its youth. There is a broader access to narcotics of an ever greater strength than before, there is less prospect of fulfilling work than ever before, and the breadth of coverage of populist anti-culture is more widespread than ever before. The advent of the "rave culture" has created in many young people a feeling that tribal unity is only possible in the presence of narcotic intoxication and in the presence of particular forms of music. The music itself is directed exclusively at the anti-culture: it fuels its message with a technical sophistication that is designed to enthrall the listener and manipulate thought patterns. Unless politicians centre on the fact that this generation does not consider itself to be rooted in any of the social structures that have come before, they will fail to develop a politics which can be communicated to this group. The politics of rave culture and the soma generation which is in danger of being produced, are real issues which political theory must deal with.

The role of a functioning, responsive legal system, will be to shape the detail of the rights and obligations owed in this evolving society. To facilitate a discourse about the contents of the rights which exist and those which perhaps ought to exist.

¹⁷see "Imagologies: Media Philosophy", Taylor and Saarinen, Routledge 1994.

¹⁸See "Late Capitalism", Ernesto Mandel, Verso.