

**LABOUR MOVEMENTS GROUP**

**THEORISING THE THIRD WAY**

*Always 'New Labour'? New Labour in Historical Perspective*

*Stephen Meredith  
Department of Politics  
University of Sheffield  
Elmfield  
Northumberland Road  
Sheffield S10 2TU*

*E-mail: [poq96scm@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:poq96scm@sheffield.ac.uk)*

**Paper prepared for the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the UK Political Studies  
Association, University of Aberdeen, 5-7 April 2002**

The paper represents a first draft. Please do not cite or quote from without the author's  
prior permission.

## Abstract

This paper does not really attempt to theorise the Third Way or New Labour as such. Instead, it attempts to question recently prominent conceptions of the relationship (or lack of it) between Labour's past and present as that between a simplistic, dichotomous Old-New Labour (see, for example, Driver & Martell, 1998). It argues that Labour's broad church and divided and disputatious nature have never conformed to the easily definable, homogeneous party of technocratic levellers implicit in the simplistic Old-New Labour dichotomy that appears to underpin the often normative judgements and agendas of both the Blairites and some of their critics as they strive to point to fundamental discontinuities between the pre- and post-Blair Labour Party.

Seen in historical perspective, Labour's recent development has been more of an evolutionary process, influenced, of course, as it always has been, by external environmental changes but, at the same time, signaling important parallels, patterns and continuities with its past rather than the complete break with and departure from that past implied in the modernisers' language of *New Labour*. Of course, under the influence of so-called 'globalisation' the economic and social context of politics has moved on apace but, in New Labour's particular appeal to absolute newness, important parallels with the past, at least as significant as any discontinuities or disjunctions, have often been hidden from view. The process of evolving in response to periodically shifting circumstances and contexts has a long lineage in Labour history.

Firstly, the paper assesses the respective arguments of one set of protagonists in this debate. Secondly, it examines the political advantages to be derived by the New Labour project from the use of particular language and rhetoric in shaping public perceptions of itself and wider political discourse. It further briefly examines a key position and argument in attempts to historicise New Labour, supported from a number of perspectives (see, for instance, Fielding, 2000; Jones, 1996; Larkin, 2000a, 2000b; and see Bale, 1997a, 1999b), that the Blairite project has distinct similarities with earlier revisionist attempts to mould and transform the party, and even with pre-1914 New Liberalism (see, for instance, Fielding, 2000). Finally, drawing upon a longitudinal perspective of Labour's development, it argues that the parallels, patterns and continuities evident in Labour's history and evolution illustrate the largely synthetic and politically (and electorally) expedient nature of the party's current designation (which, in fact, conceals a familiar trajectory in response to familiar 'old constraints').

‘The term ‘new’...occurred some thirty-seven times in Blair’s speech to the 1994 Labour Party conference and a further 104 times in the *Road to the Manifesto* document...In ‘rebranding’ itself, ‘New Labour’, with all the associated advertising blitz, Blair has effectively claimed that the party’s modernisation is over. In so doing, he has also served to complete this modernisation by distancing himself and the party symbolically and rhetorically from its past. Yet New Labour’s relation to this past is by no means uncomplicated. For, in emphasising the rupture that the ‘Blair revolution’ represents, the party has juxtaposed its present to a variety of rather different historical ‘others’’. (Hay, 1999: 3)

‘Because current concern [of political science] lies with the extent to which Tony Blair and his colleagues by *force majeure* or malign intent, have accepted the triumph of the so-called Thatcherite settlement over the so-called post-war settlement...any comparisons are likely to involve the governments of Thatcher and Major rather than those of Wilson and Callaghan, whose experience can safely be regarded as obsolete since it occurred BG (Before Globalisation)’. (Bale, 1999c: 200)

## **Introduction**

This paper is intended as a contribution to recent debates, particularly those in the pages of the PSA journal, *Politics* (see Allender, 2001a; Driver & Martell, 2001; Larkin, 2001; Rubinstein, 2000), concerning the relative continuities and/or disjunctions between New Labour and some version of ‘Old’ Labour. It argues simply and polemically that New Labour’s response and adaptation to the processes and influences that have supposedly aided and abetted its creation and informed its current ideological and political direction is not, in itself, particularly unique. Nor does it represent ‘year zero’ as New Labour apologists have had us believe. Much of the subsequent focus on a simplistic break and dichotomy between ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Labour, it is argued, is the product of deliberate and focused political rhetoric and symbolism, ably assisted by an amenable mass media (and political science profession) always in search of novelty (see Bale, 1999b: 3-4, 1999c: 193, 197). The paper offers a longitudinal perspective of Labour’s response and adaptation to periodic environmental changes and developments. To this end, it will revisit certain key episodes and processes in Labour’s past in order to emphasise, in light of the seemingly current preoccupation with novelty, the parallels, patterns and continuities in the evolution of the party and to signal the largely synthetic and politically expedient nature of Labour’s current appellation.

## **The Debate**

David Rubinstein (2000) introduced the debate by bucking the trend of recent accounts (particularly that of Driver & Martell, 1998) of New Labour that tend to emphasise the clearly defined differences and hence discontinuity from the Labour Party of the past. Rubinstein (2000: 161), drawing upon Labour’s historical development, argues that ‘the Blair-led Labour Party is the direct successor of the Labour Party of the past’, and concludes that ‘the objectives of the Blair government are not dissimilar from those of the Attlee and Wilson administrations’. Any significant change, he suggests (2000: 161, 166) is largely a consequence of ‘a rational response to the profound economic and social changes that have taken place since the 1970s’, and that it is a mistake ‘[t]o blame New

Labour for abandoning traditional values...Society has changed and political parties have inevitably changed with it' (although, as we shall see, the need to respond to a shifting or changing context is obviously not in itself new).

Driver and Martell themselves (2001), together with Phil Larkin (2001), provide a (concerted) response to Rubinstein's advocacy of clear signs of continuity between 'Old' and New Labour. While acknowledging a number of important continuities apparent in Labour's political history, the main thrust of Driver and Martell's (2001: 47, 49-50) response is that Rubinstein's argument in fact presents evidence in support of their own thesis that change, emanating from wider social factors, 'has been marked in many policy areas.' Moreover, they restate their original thesis (see Driver & Martell, 1998) that New Labour, in its contemporary 'post-Thatcherite' form, represents a break 'both with post-war social democracy and with Thatcherism.'

Larkin (2001: 51, 53-4) accepts Rubinstein's observation of important similarities and continuities between 'Old' and New Labour governments and, likewise, questions Driver and Martell's simple old/new dichotomy: this 'portrayal of the pre-Blair Labour Party...too readily accepts the representations of the party's past that allow easy old/new contrasts to be drawn.' However, he is also careful to suggest that Rubinstein's emphasis on continuity and only limited acknowledgement of a changed societal context and its inevitable consequences for political parties, their policies and strategy, underestimates how far contextual changes impact upon the aims and strategy of a 'left-of-centre' government and 'does not fully allow for the fact that even where a number of similar policies and attitudes can be identified the changed context substantially weakens social democratic intent. As such his claim that '[i]n essentials the party's policies have not changed' is...misleading.'

Finally, Paul Allender (2001a), in an attempt to assess claims of New Labour's relative novelty, adopts an interesting historical perspective that seeks 'to situate the creation and subsequent development of New Labour' within the framework of both past and present external and internal influences and developments. He concludes (2001a: 57) that '*essentially* there is nothing new about New Labour...the continuities between it and so-called 'Old Labour' are more significant than the cleavages between the two.'

The external influences which, he argues (Allender, 2001a: 58-9), represent 'shifts of a seismic nature' and have been hugely significant in 'the creation and development of the New Labour phenomenon', are based on a number of related developments: these include the 'end of the post-war political consensus' that opened the way for 'a new economic and political terrain of which neoliberalism, an attack on the welfare state and an emphasis upon the individual are the most important elements' and the gradually increasing internationalisation of capitalism, of which 'globalisation' is the latest manifestation. There are, however, a number of simultaneous internal influences upon the development of New Labour, historical in character and, only in part, connected to Labour's supposed transformation after the election debacle of 1983 and the apparently hegemonic nature of 'Thatcherism'. These, Allender (2001a: 59-60) suggests, include the historical 'modernising' precedent set by Hugh Gaitskell, the rhetorical emphasis on

'newness' and technocratic and industrial modernisation of Harold Wilson and, of course, the supposedly negative influence of the 'Bennite' years of ascendancy in the party. Moreover, even the 'politics of 'labourism'', so long identified with 'Old' Labour, also has relevance to New Labour. New Labour's relative novelty, argues Allender (2001a: 59, 60-1; also see 2001b), can be measured against the particular characteristics of labourism developed by Allender himself. An indication of New Labour's relative continuity with 'Old' Labour, it is argued, is that, far from leaving the 'politics of 'labourism'' behind, New Labour in fact displays many of its characteristics.

So, although 'the modernisation of the Labour Party represents a 'catching-up' with the economic, political and social developments of 'new times'', response and adaptation to the developments of 'new times' is not in itself new. Allender (2001a: 56, 58-60) believes that the creation of New Labour is a complex affair, but that it is a natural product of historical development and continuity, based on long-term external and internal influences. Despite having to adapt its social democratic means to an end in line with the changing economic, social and political context, Allender (2001a: 61) concludes that '[s]ocial democratic values *do* remain intact with New Labour. The problem is, then, with the values themselves, not that New Labour has abandoned them.'

This paper comes down tentatively on the side of Rubinstein (2000) and Allender (2001). It also concurs, in some respects, with Larkin's (2001) emphasis on the significance of the inevitable external influence of a 'new' economic, social and political context on the development of New Labour. It further acknowledges Driver and Martell's (2001: 49-50) contention that New Labour is not only a response to 'some new social context in which politics is conveniently left out', but also a response to the previous challenge from Thatcherism and the right 'to the values and policy instruments of the left.'

Although a new emphasis on language, in conjunction with a new relationship between politics, government and the mass media (see Fairclough, 2000), has been used to good effect by New Labour to symbolise its expression of a 'new politics' and a 'reinvention of government' (which in itself entails a greater salience for language as, in part, a new form of control), I seek to emphasise that this process of response, adaptation and acclimatisation is in itself neither unique nor absolute - that the concepts, phenomena and impact of a 'changed context' or 'new times' are not in themselves new and that the approach and broad strategy of adopting new themes or paradigms to meet 'new times' are also by no means new (cf. Labour's strategy after the Second World War of 'adopting Keynesian economics and Beveridge 'welfarism' and a general commitment to collectivism' [Allender, 2001: 61]).

As well as contributing to the idea of New Labour as somehow different to Labour's pre-Thatcher incarnation - indeed, as 'post-Thatcherite', in Driver and Martell's (2001: 49: also see 1998) encapsulation of its contemporary character - the emergence of 'new times' illustrates, paradoxically, striking similarities in Labour's broad approach and strategy in response to changing circumstances and challenges when seen in historical perspective. As Thompson (2000: 3-4) has noted, 'the New Labour project is profoundly historical' in a number of ways, one of which is 'the belief that modernisation is about

working with the tide of social change' – a type of 'passive modernisation'. It represents a type of modernisation which 'is not so much a project to transform British society – it is more one which lets perceived dominant social trends transform your politics' and, for New Labour in the 'new economy', those trends and its view of the future are configured by 'globalisation'.

Therefore, this paper expands upon and makes clearer the continuities between New and 'Old' Labour and the approach and strategies adopted to engage with periodically shifting times and context (which, in turn, questions the utility of the concepts themselves as analytical constructs). In their recent advocacy of a general interpretive framework (rather than the stark choice between essentialist 'accommodationist' and 'modernisation' interpretations) and a 'multidimensional and disaggregated' characterisation of the 'complex political phenomenon' that is Labour's current ideological and political trajectory, Kenny and Smith (2001: 234, 237, 241-2 and 253-5) have suggested that the 'sense of the historical roots of current political themes has been...obscured by the recurrent assertion that Thatcherite policies and neo-liberal political economy are the key contexts for understanding Labour.' As an example of these historical precedents, they (2001: 235-6) cite the influence exerted by 'Wilsonite modernization' upon 'the rhetoric and aspirations embodied in New Labour's modernizing programme'. In fact:

'[t]he rhetorical claims to embody all that is modern and new, and to be the force that will deliver the reversal of a perceived pattern of decline and failure, are actually rather old. They involve borrowing from a rich stock of rhetorical resources deployed by the political elite at different points throughout the century... The claim to have transcended past squabbles and divisions, and the zealous imagination of a 'new Britain'... can be detected as far back as Ramsay MacDonald and indeed have stemmed from the moralistic rhetoric of the ethical socialist tradition of the late nineteenth century'.

### **'Old' Labour: A Product of Semantics?**

'new Labour was always a marketing concept, an attempt to rebrand the party without necessarily coming to grips with its substance. (Clause Four itself, which... Blair so dramatically and successfully challenged, was important only because it was part of the old brand; it had never, for most party members, been a guide to policy and action.)'

(New Statesman, Leader Article, 2002: 4-5)

Of course, in assessing the relative continuities and disjunctions between 'Old' and New Labour, the first thing we need to remember is that much of the difference between the two 'versions' of the Labour Party can be seen as the product of particular focused rhetoric. In an attempt to create a sort of 'year zero' after 1994, the political language of the Blairite modernisers, in the form of their chief publicists, Mandelson and Liddle (1996) and Philip Gould (1998), was aimed at distancing the new, modern and, most importantly, electable party from the negative public image of its supposedly failed and redundant former self. As Fielding notes (2000: 368-9), that 'to court Conservative voters, Blair gave away 'a huge amount in language – but almost nothing in terms of policy'. None the less... Labour members believed appearance *did* reflect reality: to their minds, New Labour was the antithesis of their party's history.'

Eric Shaw (1996b: 206, 212, 217-18 also see 1996a: 52) has observed a characterisation of 'Old' Labour in which 'the past was recreated to serve the present's strategic needs... The term 'New Labour' was 'deliberately designed to distance the party from its past'... To maximize the public impact of the new name, the contrast with the old had to be as stark as possible and to make sense to voters long accustomed to consume from the tabloid press caricatured images of past Labour governments and of the Party itself. It benefited the strategic purposes of the modernizers to engage in pre-emptive auto-strikes, acknowledging the truth of much of the tabloid version and then demonstrating that 'New Labour' had learnt its lessons and wiped the slate clean.' Moreover, '[t]he very vocabulary employed – 'Old Labour' and 'New Labour', modernizers and traditionalists – was an essential part of the modernizing project. These concepts were in effect stereotypes, that is simplified and value-loaded mental images designed to project a particular view of reality and like most stereotypes they were misleading, squeezing and distorting complex reality by neatly parcelling up people into crude categories which did little justice to the diversity of views within the Party.'<sup>1</sup>

In essence, therefore, the terms of 'New' and 'Old' Labour, themselves laced with normative nuances, were deliberately designed to maximise the distance and perception between the 'old', relatively unsuccessful and discredited original and the 'new', modern and thrusting contemporary manifestation. An inevitable casualty of this attempt at semantics or linguistic symbolism was accuracy, 'sacrificed not to enhance but to belittle the original' (Shaw, 1996b: 217). A stereotype of homogeneous 'Old' Labour was created in which any sense of continuity with its past history was hastily rejected by the leading lights of New Labour which, as Shaw (1996b: 218) again suggests, was a hugely successful strategy, immediately adopted by the media, readily accepted into everyday parlance and 'used to frame [the] reporting of Labour's internal affairs.'

### **Revisionists and Modernisers: A 'Cultural' Perspective**

Of course, much recent work has emphasised New Labour's revisionist antecedents (as well as its attempt to reclaim the broader progressive tradition in British politics). Therefore, a more historically informed perspective can be traced to those who depict a heterogeneous party and acknowledge Labour's internal diversity.<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin (2000b: 13; also see 2000a; Fielding, 2000: 375-84), for instance, links New Labour's

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman Fairclough (2000) has written at length about the significant political role played by language and rhetoric in the formulation of both *New Labour* itself and in the political discourse of labels such as the 'Third Way' which are used to 'forge' and create a 'new' space and clear identity for its ideas and policies.

<sup>2</sup> It has been well documented in the literature that the British Labour Party (and socialism generally) has historically represented a broad church of ideological and political traditions (see Bealey, 1970; Callaghan, 1989: 23; Foote, 1997: 5; Freedon, 1996: 470-2; Greenleaf, 1983: 349-50, 359-539; Seyd, 1968: i-v; Warde, 1982: 1, 9-10; Wright, 1996: xiii-xiv). As we have seen, however, the arch modernisers of New Labour (Mandelson & Liddle, 1996; Gould, 1998), in the service of its particular political and electoral ambitions, would have us believe that their improved new model party somehow represents a complete break – 'year zero' in modernisers' terms – with Labour's past and with a supposedly homogeneous failed and redundant 'Old' Labour.

modernising tendency with the revisionist tradition of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Adopting Warde's (1982: 12) term, this link is conceived as a continuation of the social democratic 'segment' in the post-war Labour Party: if we acknowledge the importance of divisions and different groupings in the Labour Party (and to the internal workings of all political parties), it will affect how we approach the question of relative continuity and change in the Labour Party and of New Labour's place within it.<sup>4</sup> Larkin argues that 'the change in the direction of policy has little to do with ideological change *per se* but a change in the internal configuration of power within the party'. As evidence of this position he cites Labour's relatively 'economically interventionist' 1983 general election manifesto which, he argues, was a consequence of 'left wing dominance of the Party's organisational and policy making structures...that had generally been under the control of the centre and right' rather than of more general ideological movement or change within the party. Larkin (2000b: 21 and see 180) further suggests that if we accept that the changes made to the revisionist model that emerged during the 1950s have been consistent with the broad ideology of the social democratic segment of the party, 'the ideological newness of New Labour has as much to do with the demise of currently viable alternatives within the Party and the social democrats' ability to determine the direction of the Party unencumbered as it does with ideological renewal.' In this sense it calls to mind Rose's (1964: 35, 36) observation that policy groups and factions within 'electoral parties' are often the crucial factor in policy change.

---

<sup>3</sup> Larkin (2000b: 7-8, 12-13, 179; also see 2000a and Fielding, 2000: 379-84) attempts to historicise New Labour in relation to the revisionist social democrats of the 1950s and 1960s as a challenge to the 'orthodox perspective' that sets up New Labour in simple opposition to a generalised or aggregated (and probably non-existent) 'Old Labour'. He contends that the simplistic Old-New Labour dichotomy that underpins the normative judgements of both the Blairites and some of their critics as they point to fundamental discontinuities between the pre- and post-Blair Labour Party, assumes a degree of unity within the party that Labour has never possessed. Therefore, if we return to the previously dominant, pre-old-new conception of the Labour Party as a broad church and acknowledge the divided and disputatious nature of the party, we can achieve a more nuanced and historically informed portrait of its recent development and trajectory. The simple Old-New Labour characterisation of the party's past and present respectively, inevitably lumps together and misrepresents sections of the party, particularly its revisionist, social democratic (Gaitskellite and Croslandite) tradition. Larkin argues that if we analyse Blair's 'modernised' Labour Party in relation to this significant section of the party rather than in relation to some maligned (or, indeed, idealised) politically (and rhetorically) convenient conception of 'Old Labour' *per se*, it allows for a far greater degree of continuity in Labour's development. Indeed, Larkin appears to trace a more or less direct line between the 'social democratic section of the Labour Party' that emerged in the 1950s and the dominant 'modernising' element of the party that emerged victorious on 1 May 1997:

'whilst there have been...changes in the political economy of this section of the Party, these do not constitute a fundamental break with its ideology, the ends to which policy is focused, the characteristics of the society to be worked towards remains the same.'

<sup>4</sup> Larkin (2000a: 44) suggests that the traditional absence of formal organisation on the right reflected its relative strength within the party, only resorting to the organised faction when it felt under threat. This general absence of formal organisations on the Labour right, however, does not imply that it has not featured recognisably distinct sections within it. Warde (1982), for instance, moves beyond the formal organisations of party faction to identify various distinct 'segments' within the post-war Labour Party that are defined in terms of their adherence to shared strategies. The strategies relate to ends and means and are 'concerned with both the elements of the 'good society' to which policy should be directed, and the approach to achieving those elements'.



Larkin (2000b: 182-3) suggests that once we have established the need for a more profound examination of Labour's past as a means of locating New Labour's place in it and go beyond the simplistic conception of a straightforward, unambiguous and homogeneous 'Old' Labour to acknowledge the diverse traditions and 'segments' therein, 'certain similarities between the modernisers and the revisionists...emerge [and] [t]he circumstances surrounding the 'modernisation' of the Party in the 1980s and 1990s were broadly similar to previous attempts...So too were the processes by which this modernisation occurred.'

Adopting Bale's (1997a: 12; also see 1999b: 235-6) Cultural Theory framework for the analysis of culture and leadership in the PLP, Larkin argues that the modernisers and revisionists emanate from the same 'cultural' tradition within the party that includes a 'shared conception of the 'hierarchical' way in which the Party should be organised with a strong leader and minimal public dissent.' Larkin (2000b: 182-3) suggests that there are significant similarities in the way that Blair and Gaitskell (and even Wilson, in spite of his Bevanite legacy)<sup>5</sup> have approached the issues of discipline and decision-making in the party. This similar hierarchical line represents a shared concern and reasonably responsive approach to the perceived wishes of the public together with the determination to get tough with the party in order to maintain discipline and unity. From this perspective it may be that recent party reforms amount less to a new style and character *per se* than to the presence (or lack of it) of an emasculated left-wing opposition. In this sense, Cultural Theory<sup>6</sup> allows us to treat with some scepticism the claim of New Labour's modernising coterie that they have transformed the party and left behind the traditions and 'the stale left/right divisions of the past' (see Bale, 1999b: 27).

In addition to the organisational similarities, Larkin (2000b: 183) further contends that there is some notable continuity between the revisionist and modernising elements at an even more fundamental level: this reflects similar conceptions of what the party should be and what it should represent. A 'social democratic ethos', he suggests, 'has, for the time being, replaced the labourist ethos.' Bale himself (1997a: 12) suggests that '[w]e need waste little time arguing Blair's resemblance to Gaitskell, the archetypal hierarchical leader of the Labour Party. There are just too many systematic similarities ...with regard to their notions of what the Party should stand for and how it should organise itself: Labour should aim not to change society fundamentally, but to correct market failure by long term supply-side intervention...its parliamentary representatives must not allow their individual opinions to undermine either party unity or the leadership'. From the perspective of economic policy, interestingly, Tomlinson (1999) supports Larkin's identification of fundamental continuities between Labour's past and present. In 'key aspects of its economic policy', he (Tomlinson, 1999: 1, 21-2) argues, 'underlying continuity with the past...is more evident than radical departure. New Labour...has inherited an approach to the economy which betrays recurring weaknesses.'

---

<sup>5</sup> Although Bale (1997a: 8) has noted Peter Clarke's (1992: 258) interesting encapsulation of Wilson as 'neither Left nor Right but a Bevanite revisionist. Socially, too, he fell outside the traditional stereotypes'.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed explanation and discussion of Cultural Theory and its (potential) application to political parties and the history and politics of the Labour Party in particular (see Bale, 1997b, 1999a, 1999b; Meredith, 2001).

Although New Labour may differ from ‘Old Labour ‘in some broad ideological sense’, (expressed in the novelty of such actions as the re-writing of Clause IV of the party constitution), it also possesses what Tomlinson (1999: 21) describes as ‘a continuing attachment to an understanding of British society which drew heavily on declinist themes.’ These involve threats of competition (albeit with a new Asian geographical focus), the need to respond to supposedly irresistible terms and forces such as ‘gobalisation’ (as was the case with Wilson’s ‘automation’ in the 1960s) and a continuing belief in the primacy of education if similar decline is to be resisted in the future. Claims to novelty are standard fare in political rhetoric and, in the case of New Labour, they ‘hide some worryingly doubtful assumptions about economic performance and its determinants’ (Tomlinson, 1999: 22).

Tudor Jones (1996: 113, 131, 149), of course, has also noted the similarities between revisionists and modernisers: he describes the parallels apparent in the desire of the revisionists and modernisers to purge the party of its commitment to the ‘socialist myth’ of the idea of public ownership enshrined in Clause IV of the party constitution. He argues that the 1983-92 period inside the Labour Party, albeit cautious and sometimes inconsistent under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, ‘himself...a product of 1970s-style Labourism’ unable to escape its legacy completely (Jefferys, 1993: 128; Jones, 1996: 130), represented ‘revisionism reborn’, and the further modernisation of the party under John Smith and particularly Tony Blair represented the ‘continuation of Labour’s ‘second-stage’ revisionism’ culminating in the ‘triumph of revisionism’: ‘[v]iewed against its historical background, Tony Blair’s successful bid to rewrite Clause IV...may with justification be regarded as the culmination of a revisionist project within the Party – concerned both with demoting public ownership and with endorsing the market economy – that was initiated in the 1950s. In a wider sense, too...[it] may be seen from that perspective as the symbolic fulfillment of the desire of the Labour revisionists and their successors clearly to establish the Party’s identity in the mainstream of European social democracy.’

From the cultural theoretical perspective and framework offered by Cultural Theory, then, Labour’s complex political culture has always been (and is) a combination of universal, mutually dependent, continuously competing ‘ways of life’ each in search of dominance or even hegemony (Bale, 1999a: 77-8 and see 1997b, 1999b; also see Meredith, 2001). Although not a Cultural Theorist himself, Alan Warde (1982: 1 and see 9-24), for example, describes the Labour Party as an ‘organization sheltering a mixture’ of cultures and traditions (or ‘segments’ in his terms [see Warde, 1982: 12]) ‘whose divergent interests and aspirations frequently brought them into conflict’ and were often incompatible. He refers to ‘the systematic basis of intra-party cleavage’ and tells us that ‘[i]nternal conflict is neither unusual or eradicable.’ Warde (1982: 11-12) contends that most studies of factionalism and internal party divisions treat cleavage as ‘a pathological condition, a deviation from some ideal party unity, engineered by organized cabals’ and thus fail to properly explain the rationale behind intra-party division. Instead, he argues that ‘cleavage is a perfectly normal state of affairs, particularly in a two-party system, and is most often loosely co-ordinated.’ Warde (1982: 24) argues that:

‘intra-party conflict can best be understood in terms of competing strategies, where strategy is more than ideology and where segments, as bearers of strategy, are not reducible simply to organized groups with boundaries identifiable through the conscious appropriation of group identity. To understand the cleavages and the trajectory of the Party its members must be seen as collective bearers of social interests within a complex social system which is a severe constraint on both consciousness and action.’

From this perspective, therefore, it is hugely inaccurate to conceive of Labour’s history and recent development as a simple dichotomy and departure between homogeneous New and ‘Old’ Labours: this view can be seen as an invention of the modernisers in their haste to patent a new, dynamic and electable party (see Shaw, 1996a: 52, 1996b: 206, 212, 217-18). According to the logic of this approach, New Labour instead represents the manifestation or expression of the (temporary) dominance and attempted hegemony of one of these ‘ways of life’ or, in Warde’s (1982: 12-14) terms, ‘segments’ and ‘strategies’.<sup>7</sup> The other ‘ways of life’ continue in more or less attenuated form. As Bale (1999b: 250-1) suggests:

‘no one way of life is capable of fully capturing a reality which is only completely described by all ways of life in combination. As we have seen in the past, the decisions made by the adherents of the temporarily dominant strain will at some point result in structures, practices, rhetoric and acts which prove incapable of coping with novel and unforeseen circumstances. At that point both the party and the public are likely to begin listening to the ‘I-told-you-so’s’ of those ways of life that currently seem to make so little sense. Not for no reason are the most successful parties often the broadest churches.’

This perspective of the character and likely trajectory of New Labour has not gone unnoticed in journalistic assessments of the Blair government’s recent difficulties. John Kampfner (2002: 10) in last week’s New Statesman, for instance, argues that the balance inside the Labour Party has changed and that some believe that ‘the hegemony of the Blairite cell is on the wane’. Moreover, a ‘centre-left caucus, for so long dormant, is now coming out into the open in and around the Cabinet’ (themselves an ‘inchoate and fractious bunch’ with their own agendas). Similarly, Seumus Milne (2002), in The Guardian observes a ‘sea change’ in Labour politics as a consequence of considerable opposition to a range of unpopular policies and prospective military action pursued by the New Labour government. The government, despite itself, has helped to shift the focus of British politics to the left and now finds itself the target of opposition from a number of dissenting quarters, that adds up to ‘a potentially combustible mix’. A number of policies that might, during Blair’s first term of office, have made Labour MPs wince but bite their tongues now provokes open criticism and has forced Labour’s troops to focus on the growing chasm between themselves and their leader. A plausible ‘post-New Labour’ leader, then, will need to harness the new political and public mood and it is likely that any ‘future Labour leader will have to be the left of Blair’ (it remains to be seen whether this will cause difficulties for Gordon Brown):

---

<sup>7</sup> In Warde’s (1982: 12) developed use of the term ‘strategy’ it ‘carries overtones of an organic relationship between thought and action, theory and practice’ and the ‘nature of a strategy is dependent on the relations between three major, independent, components: an ideology, a form of organization, and a concrete historical situation.’

‘The sense that the New Labour ascendancy is past its high-water mark is palpable. For the first time since Tony Blair took over as leader...the party’s prostrate centre-left is beginning to reassert itself and the outlines of a possible alternative Labour agenda are becoming clearer.’

Moreover, Lawrence (2000: 341) adopts a similar position when he suggests that throughout Labour’s history the party has experienced ‘a number of distinct incarnations’. Building on Stedman Jones’ (1983: 243) typology of Labour’s politics, Lawrence provides a four-fold analysis of Labour’s historical incarnations, each period characterised by the domination of the party by particular interests or coalition of interests. For instance, the pre-1914 phase saw ‘an uneasy coalition between socialist prophets of the ‘new social order’ and political pragmatists whose understanding of the ‘labour interest’ remained extremely narrow’ whereas, by the century’s mid-point, an alliance between trade union leaders and ‘middle-class ‘progressives’’ underpinned the successful construction of a welfare state. During the 1970s and 1980s, in light of the discrediting of the latter two groups in the face of the widespread challenge to ‘reformist ‘welfare’ solutions’, the Labour Party seemingly transmuted into a temporary ‘vehicle of the ‘New Left’’. The final manifestation in this typology of Labour’s periodic transformations is the present incarnation during the 1990s that has been ‘self-consciously proclaimed as the birth of ‘New Labour’’. The point here is, as Stedman Jones (1983: 243; and see Lawrence, 2000: 341) argues, that political parties should not be seen as organisations with a strictly continuous historical development, but ‘as discursive ‘sites’ controlled by different social and political groupings at different times.’

### **New Labour and Labour History**

As Bale (1999b: viii, 3; also see 1999c: 196) argues, the general agreement, on both sides of the recent ‘accommodationist’ versus ‘revisionist’ debate concerning the origins and character of Labour’s apparent transformation, that ‘Blairism has to be seen as a break with the supposed ‘‘Keynesian Welfare Statism’ of ‘Old Labour’’, overlooks the fact that ‘barring the period 1945-8, Labour leaderships...were cagey about public ownership and higher direct taxation, flaky on universal welfare and by the late sixties less than sanguine about the possibility and even the desirability of continued full employment’. Moreover, in relation to the controversial field of welfare policy, New Labour’s concern to highlight its desire to ‘think the unthinkable’, supposedly a serious attempt to confront new social realities and so to further distance itself from a highly problematic aspect of its past history, reveals rather:

‘a traditional social democratic wariness about welfare, a desire to dampen expectations...and send signals of good faith to those forces that caused previous Labour governments so many problems. It may be part of a wider attempt to distance the Party from its past; but that distance is largely rhetorical if one recalls what Labour has done in office rather than promised in opposition...the Labour Party under Tony Blair is not so much *sui generis* as reverting perhaps to type.’

A similar perspective has been taken by Raymond Plant (2001: 555-6, 559): he notes that, in ideological terms, the relative pragmatism of the Blair-led party has perhaps helped to transcend much of the ideologically informed political tribalism of the past, but also observes that ‘the political practice of the Labour Party in both government and

opposition had been some way distant from its professed and fundamental ideological beliefs.’ For example, Blair’s successful revision of the (in)famous Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution (Gaitskell had failed in a similar attempt in 1959) represented the need for ‘a constitution which indicated what Labour would in fact do, not one which linked it to...an outmoded collectivist economic analysis and prescription and which Labour governments in any case had never sought seriously to implement save in the Attlee government’s nationalisation measures.’ Further, Blair’s promotion of the distinction between ends and means has a distinct lineage in postwar social democracy: ‘[i]n the 1950s when Gaitskell and Crosland were campaigning against nationalisation as a defining aim of social democracy...this distinction between means and ends was employed. In this sense Blair’s insistence on the distinction is on all fours with...social democratic thought...since...Bernstein.’ In his Fabian Society pamphlet setting out the values and goals of New Labour’s Third Way approach, Blair himself (1998: 1, 4) states that:

‘The Third Way stands for a modernised social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left, but flexible, innovative and forward looking in the means to achieve them. It is founded on the values which have guided progressive politics for more than a century – democracy, liberty, justice, mutual obligation and internationalism...The Third Way is not an attempt to split the difference between Right and Left. It is about traditional values in a changed world. And it draws vitality from uniting the two great streams of left-of-centre thought...What of Policy? Our approach is ‘permanent revisionism’, a continual search for better means to meet our goals, based on a clear view of the changes taking place in advanced industrialised societies.’

So, in spite of some of their more explicit rhetoric, it would appear that, even in the modernisers’ own conceptualisation of New Labour’s Third Way approach, there remains substantial links or continuity with the traditions, values and goals of the past. If anything, according to Blair (1998: 1-2), it appears to represent recognition of the need for expanding the necessary means of meeting core traditional values and goals in a changing and expanding world: ‘There is no necessary conflict between the two [liberals and social democrats], accepting as we now do that state power is one means to achieve our goals, but not the only one and emphatically not an end in itself...The Third Way is a serious reappraisal of social democracy, reaching deep into the values of the Left to develop radically new approaches...For me the debate starts with the core values on which the progressive centre-left is founded.’ Although Blair (1998: 1) is critical of the limited success of previous generations of revisionists,<sup>8</sup> there remains the suggestion that his own approach lies within the revisionist tradition.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Plant (2001: 560-1) argues that if ‘the constancy of values is stressed the New Labour is ‘new’ in...means only. Its revisionism extends only to means, not to ends. If values are constant in the social democratic tradition then in terms of its values New Labour is not new. It is new only in...openness, flexibility and pragmatism about the means of achieving these values.’ Blair’s insistence on a clear distinction between means and ends emphasises ‘the constancy of the values of social democracy since Blair’s argument is that values remain constant as part of the social democratic tradition while it is means that are being revised.’ Moreover, Blair’s emphasis on values and ideas such as that of ‘community’ is indicative of ‘reaching deep into the values of the Left’ (Blair, 1998: 1) as the basis for the ideas and approach of New Labour. Although the previous Gaitskellite generation of revisionists failed to fully utilise ideas such as that of ‘community’, this was not always the case. Socialist and social democratic traditions have had ‘a very rich vein of thinking about community: Robert Owen, William Morris, R.H. Tawney, the Guild Socialists and

Larkin (2000a, 2000b), as we have seen, identifies significant parallels and continuities between the so-called revisionists of the 1950s and the modernisers of New Labour. The historian, Kenneth O. Morgan (2001: 587-88) adopts a similar position when he suggests that, in spite of a number of structural changes within the party and in the wider socio-economic context, 'the claim that the whole of Labour's history prior to 1994 can be lumped together as homogeneous 'Old Labour' needs revision.' He argues that, (as we shall see) in a similar vein to Neil Kinnock (2000), 'Labour has been in a state of change and renewal since it was founded in 1900.' Labour has always been very flexible in terms of ideology: again the example of Clause IV (established in 1918) demonstrates a symbolic rather than literal pledge, 'a compass, not a commitment' and, since then, 'there have been at least three 'new' shifts in Labour's history.'

The first of these was located in the economic programme of the 1930s and the linking of socialism with the idea of 'planning' when, for the first time, 'Labour acquired a modern economic policy involving quasi-Keynesian techniques to promote growth and full employment.' The 'planners' of the 1930s, Durbin, Gaitskell and Jay, shifted Labour's focus away from early ethical imperatives to those of economics. Secondly, 1950s revisionism represented a shift away from the Attlee government's postwar programme of nationalisation, physical controls and universalism to the revisionist focus on the social agenda of greater equality, encapsulated in Crosland's famous revisionist text, *The Future of Socialism* (1956), assuming, as it did, that managed capitalism had solved the problems of economic growth. Finally, Wilson's equation of socialism and scientific development in 1963, and which contributed to Labour's election victory in 1964, 'appealed to the ideal of modernisation, of the 'white heat' of a new industrial revolution created by white-coated workers. He emphasised supply-side skills such as new training and better education, and investment in computerised technology.' Moreover, even the Wilson-Callaghan administrations of 1974-79, supposedly the archetypal example of 'Old Labour' that the Blairite modernisers have been so keen to disown, preempted a number of themes later taken up by New Labour. For example, they originally reacted against Keynesian economics with Healey's cash limits and Callaghan's declaration that greater spending was no longer the answer to recession and, again, Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of October 1976 precipitated the priority of 'Education, Education, Education'. Although not always successfully, law and order, support for the family, Welsh and Scottish devolution and acceptance of Britain's European role were also key themes of these years. Consequently, Morgan (2001: 588-89) suggests that, in this sense, 'New Labour may be reclaiming policies, or perhaps policy positions, from its own past.'

---

so on all put the idea of community/fellowship/solidarity at the heart of their value framework' (see Plant, 2001: 564). Perhaps an exception to the earlier mid-century revisionist neglect of such values can be located in the ideas and work of the Socialist Union, 'an influential ethical socialist group in the 1950s' Labour Party' that placed much importance on the notion of fellowship in its politics (Black, 1999b: 499). Indeed, according to Black (1999b: 500), 'the emphasis the Union placed on the notion of fraternity distinguished it from mainstream revisionism.' Black (1999b: 522) further suggests that this '[f]ellowship was at the heart of the way it defined its socialism' and 'was conceived in overtly moral terms – it was contingent upon a quality of character consistent with socialist ideals and values. In short, the union aspired to practise what it preached; to create a community, a working and living environment whose mores were prefigurative, as much as possible, of the socialist order.'

Furthermore, although New Labour's broad constitutional reform programme represents some degree of departure with the Labour Party of the past (although there are limitations to the degree of radicalism displayed here too [see Richards & Smith, 2001: 145, 164-6]), perhaps too much novelty and innovation is claimed for New Labour's ideas and policies: after all, '[p]olitical parties have histories and living roots, they cannot disavow their past.'

Moreover, Thompson (2000: 2-3) has recently observed that, although New Labour's Third Way draws upon a powerful politics and sociology of discontinuity, the shifting emphasis from 'beyond left and right' to modernising social democracy has resulted in the restoration of some level of historical continuity:

'The Third Way could then be expressed as 'permanent revisionism' and incremental adjustment. Some continuity with the party's ideological legacy is also present in the emphasis on reconciling previously antagonistic themes such as rights and responsibilities, enterprise and equality... Year Zero does not flow unambiguously out of the Third Way.'

New Labour, he argues, is 'profoundly historical, in at least two senses.' Firstly, it has been scarred and shaped by some of the difficulties of its recent past and, secondly, it demonstrates historical sensibility in its firm belief that 'modernisation is about working with the tide of social change... This kind of modernisation is not so much a project to transform British society – it is more one which lets perceived dominant social trends transform your politics.'

### **New Labour's 'Newness' in Historical Perspective**

An examination of two very different perspectives of Labour's historical evolution and development both appear to support the contention that the idea of New Labour as somehow wholly unrepresentative and transcendent of Labour's past is far from concomitant with the historical evidence. The first of these perspectives is the traditional left-wing critique of Labour's record in government.

#### ***The Legacy of Labourism: The 'Milibandian' Left-wing Critique of Labour Governments Old and New***

Traditionally, the Labour Party, due largely to its apparent commitment to a general philosophy of 'Labourism', has been viewed as something of an interloper in the extended family of European social democratic parties (Wertheimer, 1929: 1; also see Marquand, 1999: 17, 21-2; Minkin, 1991: 11; Taylor, 2000: 8-11). Outside of this broad functional philosophy of Labourism, it has supposedly lacked substantial theoretical, analytical or philosophical foundations. Wertheimer (1929: xii-xvii) first complained that Labour was 'completely unencumbered by philosophy, theory and general views of life' and, building on Nairn's (1964: 38, and see 56-8) analysis that Labour had developed 'not... in response to any theory about what a socialist party should be; it arose empirically, in a quite piece-meal fashion', Desai (1994: 6, 99-100, 102-6; also see Allender, 2001b: 18-19) describes Labour as 'a profoundly unintellectual party'. Labourism, she suggests, denotes 'Labour's imperviousness to philosophies or ideas in

general' and its influence within the party constitutes the principal opposition to the development of any general intellectual philosophy. Labourism, then, with its origins, in Ernest Bevin's famous phrase, in Labour's formation 'out of the bowels of the Trades Union Congress' (cited in Taylor, 2000: 8), has been seen as representative of any guiding philosophy and has supposedly been defined by a gradual, pragmatic, adaptive and reformist character and strategy.

Labour governments, supposedly constrained within the limitations of this narrow philosophy of Labourism, have long been subject to a normative critique for their adherence to this approach and for their alleged betrayal of the dictates of socialist theory and 'socialist' working class politics. Led by Ralph Miliband's (1972 [1961]) seminal account of the limitations of parliamentary socialism, the traditional left critique focuses on Labour's allegedly over-gradual and parliamentary route to power which, it is argued, has been pursued to the detriment of socialist values and the interests of its working class constituency. Building upon Miliband's paradigm text, a number of contemporary historians and political scientists, those Harrison (1991: 8-9) labels the 'Milibandetti', have similarly pointed to the profoundly conservative nature of Labour's political culture and the almost unquestioning adherence to British state structures. Consequently, they suggest, the party in government has continually failed to honour 'the socialist promise' which has frequently been implied in opposition, and the party's leaders have constantly undermined the interests of the working people they claim to represent.

In the face of familiar 'old constraints', the 'Milibandetti', in the shape of Coates (1996; also see Panitch and Leys, 2001 [1997]: 272-91), foresee a similar trajectory for New Labour. Coates (1996: 63, 67, 68-9, 70-1), in a much cited piece in *New Left Review*, 'Labour Governments: Old Constraints and New Parameters', argues that a 'New' Labour government will no doubt encounter similar constraints to past Labour governments and that its response will broadly resemble its past behaviour in such circumstances. It will, he suggests, follow a familiar path of acquiescence in the face of the powerful forces of capital in the structural political economy: 'then [it was] with multinational companies, then with international financial agencies. Those were the old constraints on Labour radicalism; and were Labour to be radical again they would all rapidly reappear' (Coates, 1996: 68-9, 71). Moreover, given Labour's historical 'coalition of two main groupings, two projects, two political universes' of 'social reformists' (keen to manipulate private capital for progressive social ends) and 'bourgeois radicals' (keen to modernise the local industrial base), 'in a very real sense *there has always been Old Labour and New Labour*... What is new in New Labour is that the forces of Old Labour are so weak. It is the *dominance and self-confidence* of the modernizers, not their novelty, which distinguishes the Blair party from its predecessors' (Coates, 1996: 68). As we have seen (see Bale, 1999a, 1999b; Larkin, 2000a, 2000b; Lawrence, 2000; Warde, 1982), this latter point is similar to those espoused by a number of analysts of New Labour's relative novelty (or lack of it) and Labour's intra-party culture more broadly from outside the confines of the traditional left critique of the limitations of 'parliamentary socialism'.



### *From 'New' Labour to New Labour*

From a very different historical angle, the second of these approaches emphasises the parallels and relative continuities in Labour history and politics from the perspective that the Labour Party has always been 'new'. In a recent *New Statesman* piece celebrating '100 Years of Labour', Neil Kinnock (2000: 28) attempts to break down the currently popular (especially within the New Labour camp itself, the media and many academic accounts) but reductionist distinction between those supposedly estranged relatives, 'Old' and 'New' Labour. Of a different political persuasion perhaps to many of today's Labour modernisers but, as leader, crucial to the gradual evolution and 'renewal' of the party after 1983, Kinnock suggests that 'at its best times, Labour always has been "new", or at least searching for dynamic change' and, in so doing, he attempts to debunk the ill-conceived myth of 'a homogeneous old Labour'.

Contrary to the dictums of the arch modernisers of New Labour, Kinnock considers the 'history and prehistory of the Labour Party' as essential and integral to the party even today, 'not for reasons of reverence and sentimentality, but because of identity and soul.' According to Kinnock (2000: 28), then, Labour is (and should be) 'a product of its past'. Admittedly, there have been developments within New Labour's party: the designation 'New Labour', as we have noted, possesses 'evident symbolism and general appeal', and others include Tony Blair's style of leadership, further modernisation of policies and party structure and the adoption of new technological and psephological techniques. However, the Labour Party at its most responsive and progressive, he argues, has always been 'new' and responsive to change. He acknowledges the existence of what he terms (perhaps ironically given his own initial political instincts) 'time-warped fundamentalists' within Labour ranks, but suggests that 'the idea of a homogeneous old Labour is something of a myth, and, like most myths, a product of ignorance.'<sup>9</sup>

As examples of Labour's essential capacity for recurrent change and relative 'newness', Kinnock cites a variety of periods and episodes in the history of the Labour Party. For example, there has been nothing more new, he suggests, than the party of Keir Hardie

---

<sup>9</sup> Colin Crouch (1997: 352-5; also see Powell, 2000) concurs that 'Old' Labour represents a broad and diverse spectrum of traditions, ideas and experiences. In terms of 'politics that had a practical importance', Crouch identifies four 'Old Labours', each a product and somehow representative of particular epochs: 'Old' Labour one was the limited but optimistic politics of the governments of the interwar years; 'Old' Labours two and three which dominated the postwar period up to 'the oil and other inflationary crises of the 1970s' were characterised respectively by the *democratic socialist* strategy of nationalisation and state planning and control, and by the *social democratic* acceptance of a competitive market economy allied to a Keynesian, interventionist and welfarist strategy that sought 'to channel rather than suppress [these competitive] market forces'; 'Old' Labour four supposedly represented 'the socialism of defensive decline' of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Each of these manifestations is new in the sense that they are responding and adapting to particular circumstances and challenges or, at least, the 'spirit of the age'. So, it could (and has been) argued, that New Labour is new in the sense that it is representative of a period of considerable socio-economic upheaval. On the other hand, New Labour is far from new in the sense that it represents a similar continuous pattern of development in terms of episodic or periodic response and adaptation to changing circumstances. Certainly, as Powell (2000) argues, the 'old' left (and, for that matter, the new right) has suffered from some re-writing of history and caricature in order to create ('new') political space for New Labour and its so-called Third Way.

‘that broke with Lib-Labbery a century ago’ and, in 1920, ‘newness’ was expressed in terms of a party that had hastened from its founding to government in little more than twenty four years. More (or even most) famously, patent ‘newness’ was ‘the most glorious feature of...Attlee’s government of welfare state creation, full employment, reconstruction and decolonisation’ and, even the difficult years of opposition and internal factional strife of the 1950s, met with a degree of confidence and considered ‘newness’ in response to some of the problems presented to Labour by changing social conditions, particularly those associated with the emergence of what has come to be known as the ‘affluent society’ (see Black, 1999a). This novel approach was best and most famously articulated through the ideas of Tony Crosland which, with their reappraisal and reaffirmation of Labour’s key notion of equality and their emphasis upon the values of personal freedom, were presented, on the dust jacket of the first edition of his classic work, *The Future of Socialism* (1956), as ‘An answer to the demands for ‘new thinking on the Left’’. Again, in the 1960s, in the wake of thirteen years of Conservative government, ‘new’ Labour was expressed in terms of a number of significant developments in the spheres of industrial reorganisation, technological initiatives, education (particularly the introduction of the Open University) and key developments in liberal social legislation. ‘Newness’, then, in the form of response and adaptation to changing conditions and circumstances, has been a key feature of Labour’s historical development. As Kinnock (2000: 28) suggests, Labour’s ideas and programme, since the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee at the very beginning, ‘have always been in a state of progressive flux, of permanent evolution. If [it is] the party of newness today, it is in part because [it] always have been.’ Labour, he contends, has retained consistent values of liberty, equity, opportunity and security for all and ‘[a]pplying those values in ways that serve the present and provide for the future is what gives Labour propulsion.’ Significant demographic change and the ‘practical requirement of both partnership and leadership in an increasingly interdependent...world’ have presented new and obvious challenges and demands but, ‘at the start of its second century, Labour remains ‘a product of its past’ and this past is ‘an attribute of the present’.

David Marquand (2000: 2), a respected long-term academic observer of Labour’s developmental history, concurs with Kinnock. The very idea of being new, he argues, ‘has always been part of the mental furniture of the Labour movement.’ The Labour Party, from its very beginnings, has developed and adapted as society and politics has evolved and, it is no accident, he suggests, that Labour’s 1945 Manifesto was called ‘*Let us face the future*’. There is, Marquand argues, ‘nothing new in the idea of being new. There’s nothing new in saying we are modernisers, that we have a unique claim to power because we understand the nature of the modern world in a way that nobody else does.’

Given the strategy of Ramsay MacDonald as leader of the party in the 1920s, for example, ‘to build up a broad-based progressive coalition extending beyond the frontiers of the Labour Party’ and of Harold Wilson’s ‘white hot heat of technology’ rhetoric and strategy to mobilise the ‘new class of technicians and scientists to produce the second great Labour victory...of 1966’, it is New Labour’s *success* rather than its pursuit of creating an ‘election-winning social coalition’ that is new.

The same can be said of New Labour's seemingly nebulous idea of the Third Way. Marquand (2000: 2) suggests that the 1945 Labour government thought that it was pursuing a third way and, from the horse's mouth, so to speak, Marquand and his revisionist colleagues of the late 1950s, under the influence of Tony Crosland, thought that they 'were offering a Third Way between old style, boring, fundamentalist socialism and old style, boring, class bound Toryism.' What this reveals, I think, is that the Third Way, yet to be given distinctive and exclusive definition and character, is a nebulous concept that can be applied to numerous situations and contexts in Labour's past. As Marquand again suggests '[t]he idea of the Third Way has been part of the psyche of the Labour movement in this country for a very long time.' Even Giddens (1998: vii-viii) himself, apparently once Tony Blair's favourite intellectual guru, acknowledges the historical lineage of the third way in social democracy and suggests that the third way represents a process of 'social democratic renewal', as the 'present-day version of the periodic rethinking that social democrats have had to carry out quite often over the past century'.

One fundamental aspect of change that has inevitably impacted upon the ideological and programmatic formation of social democratic parties, it seems, is their relationship with the global political economy. Of the level of change there is little doubt and, as Blair (1997) himself warned in Malmo, Sweden, just after New Labour's 1997 election victory, the world is passing through considerable economic change at the end of the twentieth century and '[o]ur task today is not to fight old battles but to show there is a third way, a way of marrying together an open, competitive and successful economy with a just, decent and humane society'. In light of such changes, he counselled the gathering of Europe's social democratic leaders to discard dogma 'or die'.<sup>10</sup>

Anyway, whether the Labour leadership, as opposed to its wider membership, has ever been troubled by dogma is a moot point but, as Marquand (2000: 3) comments, 'the most interesting feature of these changes is that they represent a strange kind of reversion to the past', not to the past of 'the welfare capitalism of the post-war period that the Attlee government did so much to inaugurate, the capitalism of...Keynes and...Bevin; that organised capitalism has vanished', but to a past capitalism 'uncannily reminiscent of one hundred or even 150 years ago.' It might astonish Tony Crosland, the great theorist of revisionist social democracy of the 1950s, but it would not 'surprise Karl Marx...or, for that matter, Charles Dickens.' Although huge change has occurred (and is occurring) in the global political economy, '[i]n a profound sense we have returned to a world disconcertingly like the one that the founders of the Labour Party were trying to change one hundred years ago.'

---

<sup>10</sup> Although Clift (2001: 62-3, 71-2; also see Clift, 2000) notes the 'disingenuous, rhetorical use' of globalisation theory by some closely associated with New Labour, and that the French Parti Socialiste, along with other European social democratic parties, have undertaken a rather different adaptation of their social democratic programme and commitments in the face of constraining global forces (perhaps itself indicative that New Labour maintains its traditional and distinctive difference from European social democracy). Ironically, it seems, then, given Blair's (1997) advice to his own party, passed on to other European leaders at the Malmo Congress, that 'we modernize or die', New Labour is travelling the well-worn path of its predecessors in its relationship with international capital and the constraining factors of the global political economy.

## Conclusions

‘De-emphasising the old/new Labour dichotomy would leave the party freer to capture a sense of direction, looking to the future, but informed by the past.’

(Thompson, 2000: 6)

The objective here has not been to provide substantial new historical evidence; the paper is intended to be both polemical and provocative and so, in some small way, stimulate further, more substantial research into the broad themes and arguments presented here. The underlying rationale is to argue and, hopefully, to demonstrate that analysts of New Labour, seemingly seduced by the appeal of novelty and the portrayal of (absolute) ‘newness’, should not hurry to distance their subject from its past and the significant parallels, patterns and continuities that lie therein.

As forewarning to both the propagandists of New Labour (in conjunction with a highly malleable media) and the academic history and political science professions alike, Royden Harrison (1991: 12) tells us:

‘Labour history which is uninformed by any theoretical insights is dead, but unless those insights themselves are being continually modified and refreshed by the process of historical discovery it will be sterile. When it comes to the Labour Party, whether in theory or in practice, past or present, there is still everything to fight for.’

Moreover, as Lawrence (2000: 361) reminds us, in relation to the desire of the New Labour leadership to connect the ‘myths of triumph’ surrounding its 1997 general election victory (cf. Labour’s 1945 victory – see Blair, 1995: 2-3) with fresh ‘foundation myths’ concerning ‘the birth of ‘New Labour’ (see, for instance, Wright, 1997), mythologies have always been part of Labour history. He cautions that, ‘by relying so heavily on myths of ‘newness’ to define their project’, they risk the danger of conceding past terrain (together with its unifying and motivating myths) to their currently (but perhaps temporarily) embattled opponents within the party. In adversity, perhaps including the difficulties of the present context (see Kampfner, 2002; Milne, 2002), these same opponents might ‘seek to mobilise mythic accounts of Labour’s past in order to challenge the modernising myths of ‘New Labour’.

While acknowledging the dangers implicit in considering the relationship between a specific phase in a party’s history and its ideological lineages more broadly (that might, in turn, invite substantial questions concerning ‘the relationship between political thought and practice, and collective beliefs and actions’), Kenny and Smith (2001: 249-50) argue that it is important to analyse Labour’s development in terms of ‘established political traditions through the notion of ‘path dependency’. Current praxis, they contend, emerges out of the history of the party’s thought and practice, as well in relation to some of the broader traditions of the polity.’ In fact, they contend that ‘‘New Labour’ can...only be understood through attention to the selective mobilization of...important intellectual and ideological lineages within British politics’.

Indeed, building on Kitschelt's (1994) assessment of the transformation of European social democracy in terms of the emergence of a new kind of 'liberal socialism' – a merger between 'the classical values of social democracy with the triumphant neo-liberalism of the 1970s and 1980s' - Berger (2000: 330-3; also see Fielding, 2000: 375-84) asserts that, under the auspices of 'modernisation', social democratic parties have 'reclaimed some of their forgotten traditions'. Blairism and New Labour (if leader and project are allowed to be combined), then, represent 'a re-evaluation of pre-1914 New Liberalism and a more positive re-examination of the Gaitskellites as well as the Wilson years'. Blair's emphasis of the revision of Clause IV was significant because it was the stumbling block that led to the failure of the Gaitskellites' alleged failure to modernise the party in the 1950s: New Labour and Blair 'could now successfully demonstrate that he had ended the legacy of the late 1970s and early 1980s and had returned to the reformist traditions of the party' in the same way that the German SPD under Schroder 'has consciously harked back to the legacies of technocratic modernisation under...Schiller and...Schmidt in the 1960s and 1970s' in order to return German social democracy to the centre ground and to attract sections of the middle class electorate:

'Like their reformist predecessors in the 1950s, liberal socialists refute any fundamental opposition towards capitalism. Instead they seek regulatory frameworks in which capitalism can be made to work for the good of the greatest possible number...Hence, liberal socialists stress their commitment to social-democratic norms and values – nowhere more so than in Britain. They talk about increasing life chances, equality of opportunities...social justice, reviving the spirit of solidarity, a fair deal and giving a new ethical basis to society...for example, the 1998 Labour budget was widely credited with producing a more equal distribution of wealth...of being redistributive in the old social-democratic sense...Liberal socialists...are trying out, in Blair's words, 'permanent revisionism'.

As the chief proponent (Hay, 1999: 5-8) of the 'accommodationist' thesis suggests, perhaps ironically,<sup>11</sup> 'New Labour's invocation of novelty...should not be seen to imply a strictly chronological, far less linear, conception of historical time', and that even New Labour itself has not sought to reject its past outright. There have been moments of selective (and occasionally revisionist) historical memory and nostalgia: 'in its somewhat stylised reconstruction of its own history...the Labour Party has sought to reclaim as much as it has rejected...whilst going to considerable trouble to distance itself from the 'old labourist' politics of the Wilson/Callaghan government, Foot and even, where convenient, Kinnock, it exhibits a certain selective nostalgia for the politics of renewal and modernisation associated in particular with Attlee and the Wilson of 1964 (if not his later incarnation).' Paradoxically, perhaps, the political reputation of Wilson has, in a sense, inadvertently undergone something of a partial revision and rehabilitation from certain comparisons with New Labour. This applies particularly to 'the rhetoric and symbolism of opposition...the combination of 'technocratic modernism' and the (rhetorical) juxtaposition of a moribund Conservatism...with Labour's visionary dynamism' (also see Mandelson & Liddle, 1996: 49). Moreover, New Labour's desire to associate itself with the 'spirit of 1945' and a related desire to 'set out how the enduring

---

<sup>11</sup> Ironic in the sense that this thesis is based on an analysis and understanding of New Labour that does emphasise 'historical' antecedents in the origins, character and trajectory New Labour, but the precedents are not those of its own past but rather those of an explicit acceptance of the more recent historical phenomenon of the economic, political and electoral dictates of Thatcherite neo-liberalism and the supposedly contemporary constraints of globalisation and capitalist restructuring.

values of 1945 can be applied to the very different world today' (also see Blair, 1995: 1-2, 1996: 4), 'conjures a cyclical conception of political time – of long periods of stasis and incremental evolution punctuated only infrequently by the modernizing spirit of renewal and rejuvenation which animated Attlee and (if to a lesser extent) Wilson as it now animates Blair. Blair's New Labour is, in this revisionist autobiographical history, the reincarnation of Attlee's New Jerusalemism.'

As a rejoinder, then, to the alleged tendency of political science, always in pursuit of novelty, to 'bracket off' the past' in favour of the present and hence to leave behind Labour's past (especially its past in government) in some sort of historical no-man's land that is the idea of a 'postwar consensus', Bale (1999b: 3-4; also see 1999c: 200) observes:

'it is surely self-evident that we should take Labour's previous performance seriously, to try to relate its 'contemporary operations...to its past practices'...rather than simply skate over the latter in the rush to define its *New* [italics added] identity. Just as importantly, unless the complexity of that past is recognised and the possible continuities between it and the present explored, any such definition risks – more by default than design – becoming academic ammunition for the current leadership in its ongoing campaign to stress that the party has miraculously escaped the contradictions and constraints that made its previous occupancy of office so difficult.'

## References

- Allender P. (2001a) 'What's New About 'New Labour'?', Politics 21 (1) 56-62
- Allender P. (2001b) What's Wrong With Labour? (London: Merlin Press)
- Bale T. (1997a) 'Struggling out of the straitjacket? Culture and Leadership in the British Labour Party', paper presented to the ECPR Workshop, 'Cultural Theory in Political Science: Comparisons and Applications', Bern, 27 February – 4 March
- Bale T. (1997b) 'Towards a 'Cultural Theory' of Parliamentary Party Groups', Journal of Legislative Studies 3 (4) 25-43
- Bale T. (1999a) 'Broad Churches, Big Theory and One Small Example: Cultural Theory and intra-party politics', in Thompson M., Grendstad G. & Selle P. (eds.) Cultural Theory as Political Science (London: Routledge) 77-89
- Bale T. (1999b) Sacred Cows and Common Sense: The Symbolic Statecraft and Political Culture of the British Labour Party (Aldershot: Ashgate)
- Bale T. (1999c) 'The logic of no alternative? Political scientists, historians, and the politics of Labour's past', British Journal of Politics and International Relations 1 (2) 192-204
- Bealey F. (ed.) (1970) The Social and Political Thought of the British Labour Party (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson)
- Berger S. (2000) 'Labour in comparative perspective', in Tanner D., Thane P. & Tiratsoo N. (eds.) Labour's First Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 309-40
- Black L. (1999a) The Political Culture of the Left in 'Affluent' Britain, 1951-1964, Unpublished PhD Thesis, London Guildhall University
- Black L. (1999b) 'Social Democracy as a Way of Life: Fellowship and the Socialist Union, 1951-9', Twentieth Century British History 10 (4) 499-539
- Blair T. (1995) Let Us Face the Future - the 1945 anniversary lecture, Fabian Pamphlet 571 (London: Fabian Society)
- Blair T. (1996) New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country (London: Harper Collins)
- Blair T. (1997) Speech to the Party of European Socialists Congress, Malmo, Sweden, 6 June (London: The Labour Party)
- Blair T. (1998) The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century (London: Fabian Society)

Callaghan J. (1989) 'The Left: The Ideology of the Labour Party', in Tivey L. & Wright A. (eds.) Party Ideology in Britain (London: Routledge) 23-48

Clarke P. (1992) A Question of Leadership: From Gladstone to Thatcher (Harmondsworth: Penguin)

Clift B. (2000) 'Third Way or *Realisme de Gauche*? The new social democracy in France', Radical Philosophy 101, May-June

Clift B. (2001) 'New Labour's Third Way and European Social Democracy', in Ludlam S. & Smith M.J. (eds.) New Labour in Government (Basingstoke: Macmillan) 55-72

Coates D. (1996) 'Labour Governments: Old Constraints and New Parameters', New Left Review 219, September-October, 62-77

Coates D. & Panitch L. (2001) 'Analyzing the Labour Party: the Continuing Relevance of the Milibandian Perspective', paper presented to the 'Interpretations of Labour' Conference, Labour Movements Group, UK Political Studies Association, Mechanics Institute, Manchester, 6 July 2001, available from: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/N-Q/pol/coatesumm.doc> [accessed 24/6/01]

Crosland C.A.R. (1956) The Future of Socialism (London: Jonathan Cape)

Crouch C. (1997) 'The Terms of the Neo-Liberal Consensus', Political Quarterly 68 (4) 352-60

Desai R. (1994) Intellectuals and Socialism: 'Social Democrats' and the Labour Party (London: Lawrence & Wishart)

Driver S. & Martell L. (1998) New Labour: Politics After Thatcherism (Cambridge: Polity Press)

Driver S. & Martell L. (2001) 'From Old Labour to New Labour: A Comment on Rubinstein', Politics 21 (1) 47-50

Fairclough N. (2000) New Labour, New Language? (London: Routledge)

Fielding S. (2000) 'New Labour and the past', in Tanner D., Thane P. & Tiratsoo N. (eds.) Labour's First Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 367-92

Foote G. (1997) The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History, Third Edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan)

Freedon M. (1996) Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach (Oxford: Clarendon Press)



- Gould P. (1998) The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party (London: Little, Brown)
- Greenleaf W. H. (1983) The British Political Tradition, Volume Two: The Ideological Heritage (London: Methuen)
- Harrison R. (1991) 'Labour Party history: Approaches and interpretations', Labour History Review 56 (1) 8-12
- Hay C. (1999) The Political Economy of New Labour: Labouring under false pretences? (Manchester: Manchester University Press)
- Jefferys K. (1993) The Labour Party Since 1945 (London: Macmillan)
- Jones G. Stedman (1983) Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Jones T. (1996) Remaking the Labour Party: From Gaitskell to Blair (London: Routledge)
- Kampfner J. (2002) 'Cutting Tony down to size', New Statesman, 1 April, 10-11
- Kenny M. & Smith M. J. (2001) 'Interpreting New Labour: Constraints, Dilemmas and Political Agency' in Ludlam S. & Smith M. J. (eds.) New Labour in Government (Basingstoke: Macmillan) 234-55
- Kinnock N. (2000) 'New? We've always been new', New Statesman, 28 February, 28
- Kitschelt H. (1994) The Transformation of European Social Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Larkin P. (2000a) 'New Labour and old revisionism', Renewal 8 (1) 42-9
- Larkin P. (2000b) Revisionism & Modernisation in the Post-war British Labour Party Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex
- Larkin P. (2001) 'New Labour in Perspective: A Comment on Rubinstein', Politics 21 (1) 51-55
- Lawrence J. (2000) 'Labour – the myths it has lived by', in Tanner D., Thane P. & Tiratsoo N. (eds.) Labour's First Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 341-66
- Mandelson P. & Liddle R. (1996) The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver (London: Faber and Faber)

- Marquand D. (1999) The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair, Revised Second Edition (London: Orion/Phoenix)
- Marquand D. (2000) 'History today', Fabian Review 112 (1) 2-3
- Meredith S. (2001) 'Cultural(ist) Approaches to the Labour Party', paper presented to the 'Interpretations of Labour' Conference, PSA Labour Movements Specialist Group, Mechanics Institute, Manchester, 6 July, available from: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/N-Q/pol/imgshop/meredith.pdf> [accessed 24/6/01]
- Miliband R. (1972 [1961]) Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour, Second Edition (London: Merlin Press)
- Milne S. (2002) 'Labour has undergone a sea change', The Guardian, 28 March, 24
- Minkin L. (1991) The Contentious Alliance (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)
- Morgan K. O. (2001) 'New Labour' in Historical Perspective', in Seldon A. (eds.) The Blair Effect: The Blair Government 1997-2001 (London: Little, Brown & Co.) 583-9
- Nairn T. (1964) 'The Nature of the Labour Party – I', New Left Review 27, 38- 65
- New Statesman, Leader Article (2002) 'The future of Tony Blair', New Statesman, 25 March, 4-5
- Panitch L. & Leys C. (2001 [1997]) The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour, Second Edition (London: Verso)
- Plant R. (2001) 'Blair and Ideology', in Seldon A. (eds.) The Blair Effect: The Blair Government 1997-2001 (London: Little, Brown & Co.) 555-68
- Powell M. (2000) 'Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue: the Jackdaw Politics of the Third Way', paper presented to The Third Way and Beyond Conference, University of Sussex, 2 November 2000, available from: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/CST/for/3rdway/sosnsbsb.rtf> [accessed 9/11/00]
- Richards D. & Smith M. J. (2001) 'New Labour, the Constitution and Reforming the State', in Ludlam S. & Smith M.J. (eds.) New Labour in Government (Basingstoke: Macmillan) 145-66
- Rose R. (1964) 'Parties, Factions and Tendencies in Britain', Political Studies 12 (1) 33-46
- Rubinstein D. (2000) 'A New Look at New Labour', Politics 20 (3) 161-67

Seyd P. (1968) Factionalism within the Labour Party: A Case Study of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism, Unpublished MPhil Thesis, University of Southampton

Shaw E. (1996a) 'From Old Labour to New Labour', Renewal 4 (3) 51-9

Shaw E. (1996b) The Labour Party since 1945 (Oxford: Blackwell)

Taylor R. (2000) 'Out of the Bowels of the Movement: The Trade Unions and the Origins of the Labour Party 1900-18', in Brivati B. & Heffernan R. (ed.) The Labour Party: A Centenary History (Basingstoke: Macmillan) pp. 8-49

Thompson P. (2000) 'Living in the present, haunted by the past: New Labour and Year Zero', Renewal 8 (1) 1-6

Tomlinson J. (1999) 'Nothing New Under the Sun? Understanding New Labour', Brunel University, Department of Government, Discussion Paper 2/99

Warde A. (1982) Consensus and beyond: The development of Labour Party strategy since the second world war (Manchester: Manchester University Press)

Wertheimer E. (1929) Portrait of the Labour Party (New York: Putnam)

Wright T. (1996) Socialisms old and new (London: Routledge)

Wright T. (1997) Who Wins Dares: New Labour – New Politics, Fabian Pamphlet 579 (London: Fabian Society)