

What's New About 'New Labour'?

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There have been many words written and said about New Labour. With a view to not adding any further unnecessary ones here, this article will focus upon and evaluate the claim of novelty. What is it that is new about New Labour? What constitutes this 'newness'? Is it a new political formation or just a product of 'spin'? Or is it something else? After a very brief reference to the literature, this article will seek to situate the creation and development of New Labour within some external causal factors and also refer to internal influences upon it.

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Steve Ludlam has done all of us who are studying New Labour a great service with his review article 'New Labour: What's Published is What Counts' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 2(2), June 2000. While not absolutely exhaustive, his list of books reviewed plus his bibliography is a tremendous resource and I refer the reader to it as a reading list.

Perspectives on New Labour

For my part, I divide the literature, as regards the novelty of New Labour, into six perspectives. These are:

- The 'New Labourites': mainly Mandelson and Liddle (1996); Gould (1998); Blair (1996 and 1998), plus work from Demos and other groups inside the New Labour 'camp';
- Opposition from the Labour Left and others: mainly Ken Coates, Michael Barratt Brown et al. from Spokesman Books in Nottingham, but also Roy Hattersley (1998);
- The third way and/or a new social democracy: Anthony Giddens (1998); Will Hutton (1999); Andrew Gamble and Tony Wright (1999);
- Those who suggest that New Labour is merely a product of 'spin', ranging from Norman Fairclough (2000) to Stephen Bayley (1998);
- Those who stress the continuities between Old and New Labour: David Coates (1996); Royden Harrison (1996); Paul Anderson and Nyta Mann (1997); Geoffrey Foote (1997); David Rubenstein (2000);
- Those who suggest that New Labour is continuous with Thatcherism: *Marxism Today* (1998) but also Colin Hay (1999); Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (1997); Richard Heffernan (2000).

There are also a number of texts that do not fit easily into any of these categories: Coates and Lawler (2000); Driver and Martell (1998); Shaw (1996); Brivati and Bale (1997); Hazell (1999); Blackburn and Plant (1999); the forthcoming Ludlam and Smith (2000); Taylor (1999), plus a number of others.

It is very difficult to select from the literature to make some general points. However, Mandelson and Liddle (1996), Ken Coates (1996 and 1999), Giddens (1998), Gamble and Wright (1999), Fairclough (2000), Harrison (1996), *Marxism Today* (1998), Hay (1999), Coates and Lawler (2000), Driver and Martell (1998), and Brivati and Bale (1997) stand out as must-be-read texts.

New Labour as Continuous with 'Old'

This article will argue that *essentially* there is nothing new about New Labour. As such, it falls into the fifth perspective, above. That is, the continuities between it and so-called 'Old Labour' are more significant than the cleavages between the two. Times have changed and British social democracy perceived that it needed to modernise itself to catch up with these 'new times'. It is interesting to note that both Mandelson and Liddle (1996) and Blair (1996 and 1998) stress the continuities between New Labour and the party's traditions, particularly its founders and the post-war government. Perhaps one quote from Blair is sufficient to illustrate this: 'Our values do not change. Our commitment to a different vision of society stands intact. But the ways of achieving that vision must change. The programme we are in the process of constructing entirely reflects our values. Its objectives would be instantly recognisable to our founders ...' (Blair, 1996, p. 18). So, the 'arch-modernisers' also emphasise continuities. What is it then, according to them, that makes it different to 'Old Labour'? There is the obvious 'modernisation' element, much more of which later. However, there is also the question of *which* 'Old Labour' they are comparing themselves with. If it is the founders of the party and the 1945 Labour government, they cite continuities. However, if it is the corporatism of Wilson and Callaghan of the 1970s or the 'Bennite aberration of the late 1970s and the early 1980s' (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, p. 21), then they are very keen indeed to put as much distance as possible between New Labour and Old.

Mandelson and Liddle, Blair and others have been accused of falsifying Labour history (Marquand in Gamble and Wright, 1999; Barratt Brown and Coates, 1996; Shaw, 1996; Hutton, 1999). It is not so much that they *falsify* Labour history as massively *over-simplify* it, a practice that many historians can be accused of. When Mandelson and Liddle (1996) state that there have been two dominant approaches to socialism – Marxism and ethical socialism – they are over-simplifying. Whilst acknowledging that old Labour was not Marxist, they suggest that it was influenced by it. The extent to which this is the case and the many and varied manifestations that this influence might have taken are both highly debatable. However, in the interests of brevity, this section will be quickly concluded by suggesting that the New Labourites are selective in both their 'reading' of Labour's history and the particular parts of that history they want to identify themselves with and the parts they want to distance themselves from. The most important element of their overall argument and claim is the one drawn attention to above: that New Labour remains true to the core values of the Labour Party and that it represents a modernisation of the means by which these values are applied in the contemporary period. It is this claim that will be subjected to critical analysis and evaluation in the remainder of this article.

Modernisation – What do they Mean?

It is important to attempt to ascertain what modernisation means for the New Labourites. The precedents of Gaitskell's revisionism of the 1950s and Wilson's technocratic modernisation of the 1960s could be cited and both could be said to have played a part in contributing to the development of New Labour. Gaitskell could be said to provide the political direction and Wilson the appeal to technocratic methods. However, there is much more to the phenomenon than merely these two influences. Another important factor to take into account (which the Gaitskell and Wilson examples jointly, and neatly, suggest) is the idea that modernisation provides a smokescreen behind which New Labour has moved the party massively to the right. Why is modern also right-wing? Panitch and Leys (1997) argue impressively that the real modernisers were the New Left whose representatives inside the Labour Party were those of the Bennite persuasion in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, this also seems to miss the point. Modernisation is one issue and left/right ideological differences are another. There is no a priori reason why modern should be left- or right-wing. There are political differences and there are temporal considerations. The two should never be confused, although it is clearly in the interests of some politicians to do just that. These ideas, then, will inform and run through this consideration of the novelty of New Labour.

External and Internal Influences upon New Labour

As promised at the beginning of the article, I will seek to situate the creation and subsequent development of New Labour within some important external factors and then cite some very influential internal ones. First, the external. The end of the post-war political consensus in the late 1970s is a subject that has been much debated, not least by Marsh et al. (1999) and Hay (1999). Its very existence has been subject to question, but I will operate here with a rather crude assumption that Mrs Thatcher's ascendancy began (or continued) a period of rupture of the post-war settlement. That said, it created 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. All of these, and much more, have had tremendous influence upon New Labour and a number of commentators draw our attention to this (Panitch and Leys, 1997; *Marxism Today*, 1998; Hay, 1999). The point is often made that it was Healey and Callaghan's abandonment of Keynesianism in 1976 that signalled the end of the consensus, which actually reinforces the notion of continuity within Labour.

The end of the post-war consensus had, at the very least, something to do with increasing internationalisation of trade and finance. In turn, the development of the European Union was clearly both a result of the latter and a cause of it. Labour's relationship with Europe has been a subject of great, and sometimes bitter, internal debate since the early 1960s. New Labour put an end to all that: it announced that it is unequivocally pro-European in all matters. So, putting it very simply, the development of the European Union, in a number of ways, has been an essential influence in the modernisation of the Labour Party.

The demise of Communism in Eastern Europe clearly had an effect on left-of-centre politics all around the world. The early expectation that social democracy

might be the main beneficiary was proven wrong, as Gamble and Wright (1999) have noted. What *has* happened though is that *socialist* and *left-wing* social democratic thought, and practice, has been badly damaged, and even discredited, by the so-called 'velvet revolution'. The beneficiaries are the right-wings of social democratic movements of which New Labour is the British representative. Adopting neoliberal economics and a concern for the individual was relatively easy in an environment in which left alternatives appear to have been discredited.

The latest manifestation of the internationalisation of capitalism has achieved celebrity status under the name of *globalisation*, thanks to numerous commentators in the United Kingdom of which Giddens and Held (e.g. Held, 1999) are probably the best known. Along with involvement in what has become known as 'the information society' and 'the global village', it is now *de rigueur* for social democrats everywhere to embrace everything 'cyber'. Hence we get Blair et al. imploring us to 'face the challenge' of e-commerce and the internet. The idea of globalisation has clearly had an influence on those thinkers nearest to New Labour. Tony Blair's 'guru', Anthony Giddens, is the most celebrated example. In turn, Blair and Mandelson et al. have embraced the globalisers' thesis.

Hence, these external factors, some of which are quite clearly shifts of a seismic nature, have been of tremendous importance to the creation and development of the New Labour phenomenon.

Now, on to the internal influences. Clearly the politics of labourism and the development of the Labour Party throughout the twentieth century has *something* to do with New Labour. What this relationship consists of is a much-debated point. For Ken Coates et al., New Labour represents a departure from what the party stands for and a betrayal of working people, particularly the abandonment of the commitment to full employment. For Coates and Barratt Brown, this commitment is absolutely central for 'a party of labour'. This sense of betrayal is equally the case for Roy Hattersley (1998), from another part of the party's political spectrum. This article will later conclude with an application of some 'tests' of labourism applied to New Labour – that is, an examination of the extent to which New Labour represents a continuity with the party's past and the extent to which it is a departure.

Hugh Gaitskell has already been mentioned as a possible influence on the creation of New Labour. In fact, he does not even get a mention in Mandelson and Liddle (1996), nor in Blair's collected speeches (1996). However, Gould refers to Gaitskell's revisionism as 'the first modernising tendency within the party.' (Gould, 1998, p. 30). Along with his failed attempt to change Clause IV of the party's constitution, this represents something of an early precedent for New Labour. Gould writes: 'The language used by Gaitskell in public and others in private is uncannily similar to that used by Tony Blair and other modernisers a generation later' (Gould, 1998, p. 33).

Harold Wilson also represents an interesting precedent for New Labour. At the rhetorical level, the party manifesto of 1964 was entitled *The New Britain* and the 'invention' of New Labour took place at the 1994 Party Conference with the words *New Labour, New Britain* as the platform backdrop. Wilson's speech to the 1963

Party Conference included the famous ‘white heat’ reference, and Blair’s speeches, too, are peppered with such technocratic notions. The ‘scientific revolution’ that Wilson was referring to in 1963 is clearly a very different one to the ‘information revolution’ at the turn of the millennium, but the sentiment is the same: that of industrial and technical modernisation offering new opportunities. Interestingly, and perhaps not coincidentally, this shared technocratic approach also displays similar attitudes to the trade unions. Wilson’s famous phrase was uttered thus: ‘The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for out-dated methods on either side of industry’ (quoted in D. Coates, 1975, p. 99). This echoes Blair’s constant mantra of treating management and unions equally.

However, and ironically, it is probably the years of what Mandelson and Liddle (1996) refer to as the ‘Bennite aberration’ that are the most influential on New Labour. The desperate, electoral-driven desire to distance themselves from that period have led the New Labourites to reverse almost every policy of that time, as David Coates (1996) notes. It is often forgotten that this period was very short-lived: at the very most it lasted from 1977 to 1983.

The Labourism of New Labour

The final test of New Labour’s alleged novelty will very briefly be conducted with reference to seven characteristics of labourism that I devised in my Ph.D. thesis entitled *What is Labourism?* As such, they are not to be found in the current literature on either the Labour Party generally or more specifically on New Labour. They are: an absence of ideology; a confused and confusing policy-making process; ‘pragmatism’ over principles; the emphasis of the national over the ‘sectional’; a disingenuous emotional appeal; a lack of democracy and excessive bureaucracy; and finally a ‘culture of defeatism’.

First, it is undoubtedly the case that New Labour is operating without an ideology. Blair, and others, constantly make reference to the need to be pragmatic and not be restricted by ideology, such as ‘New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works’ (Labour Party, 1997, p. 4). Again, we see the confusion between political and temporal considerations. The important point here is that Blair dismisses ideology. This has been the case right throughout Labour’s history: successive leaders have spurned ideology and embraced ‘pragmatism’, more of which below.

Since the party’s inception, the way in which policy has been made has been piecemeal, reactive and confused. Even the resolution that provided the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900 with its aims and objectives was itself an *amendment* to one from the Social Democratic Federation which would have committed the new organisation to fighting the ‘class war’. Right throughout its history, the party’s approach to policy-making has resembled a lottery. This was formalised in 1997 when the *Partnership in Power* proposals were adopted by the Party Conference. This provides a highly complex and convoluted means of policy formulation which almost defies understanding.

The first point, an absence of ideology, is linked to the next one: the idea that it is possible to be pragmatic without any guiding principles. Again, Labour has

attempted, unsuccessfully, to do this right throughout the last century. In any human action, whether it be individual or collective, pragmatism must *always* and *necessarily* be guided by some principles, no matter how rudimentary. New Labour is as committed as the party has always been to the notion of pragmatism in an ideological vacuum.

The Labour Party started life as one which was dominated, numerically and financially, if not ideologically, by trade unionism. The LRC was created to represent working people, in fact 'labour', in parliament. However, from the beginning it claimed to represent the nation as a whole. This applies equally to Ramsay MacDonald in 1903 and 1924, Clem Attlee in 1945 and Tony Blair in 1997. There is surely, at the very least, a problem here: a party created by a particular section of society to represent it may experience some problems (and indeed it has!) in presenting itself as a national one.

The next characteristic of labourism, a disingenuous emotional appeal, relates to the constant exhortations by party leaders to support the 'great movement', 'social justice', 'the march forward' or even 'inevitable gradualism'. In itself, this is no bad thing. However, for the Labour Party, with no clear aims or ends, these things are merely rhetorical devices employed for electoral purposes. This can equally be applied to the various visual, symbolic representations used in posters, leaflets, badges and postcards. Tony Blair takes this disingenuous emotional appeal to new heights. Examples abound of this, but his appeals to 'trust him' in the general election campaign and his constant references to his own family, particularly in his 1996 conference speech, stand out.

Finally, the idea of the culture of defeatism. This has something to do with the party's predilection to 'aim low' so as not to fail. Numerous examples can be found in the party's history, the abandonment of the 1926 General Strike being the most famous. Again, Blair's New Labour has made a virtue of this lack of ambition with its five or ten election 'pledges' of 1997.

To conclude, I suggest that the modernisation of the Labour Party represents a 'catching-up' with the economic, political and social developments of 'new times', some of which I have referred to above. One way in which this could be represented is the following. After the Second World War, 'cutting with the political grain' (to use Blair's phrase from his speech to the Fabian Society in 1995) meant adopting Keynesian economics and Beveridge 'welfarism' and a general commitment to collectivism. After Thatcher, it means adopting neoliberal economic policies, an abandonment of the commitment to the 'universal' welfare state and a greater emphasis upon the individual. Both are claimed to be social democratic means to an end. Social democratic values *do* remain intact with New Labour. The problem is, then, with the values themselves, not that New Labour has abandoned them.

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