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Modernisation’ vs. ‘Progressivism’: New Labour and the Progressive Tradition

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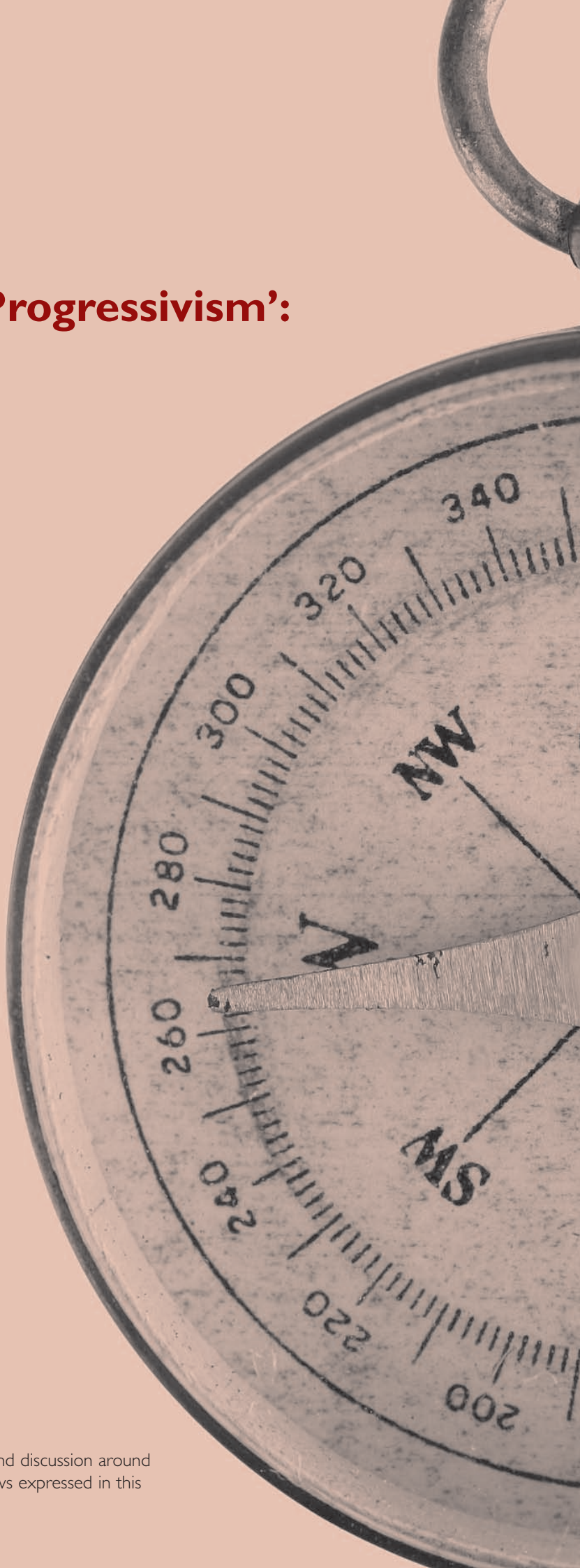
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'There has never been a single social-democratic orthodoxy, and it would be astonishing if one were to develop in this time of bewildering flux. Now, even more than in previous decades, it is wiser to think of social democracies than of social democracy.'



‘Modernisation’ vs. ‘Progressivism’: New Labour and the ‘Progressive’ Tradition

David Moon, University of Sheffield

Opening his recent book *After New Labour*, Will Leggett points out that ‘...in the face of a deeply unpopular war in Iraq and mounting disputes over his domestic agenda, Tony Blair comfortably won a historic third term with an ‘unremittingly New Labour’ manifesto.’ And yet, Leggett continues, ‘New Labour is not loved’ and ‘has no depth of support.’ Despite being in power for a decade, he claims, we ‘cannot identify a Blairite or Third Way voter in the way we could spot a supporter of, say, Mrs Thatcher.’^[i] Similarly, writing in *Renewal*, Alan Finlayson claimed that ‘New Labour is not loved, feared or admired. It is merely tolerated as not being as incompetent as the others. It has not won any hearts and minds.’^[ii] Such criticisms have been expressed by numerous writers and thinkers including David Marquand, Neal Lawson and Polly Toynbee. All share in the sense that New Labour has failed to live up to the ‘progressive tradition’ and that, as I hope to demonstrate, New Labour – the term, as used here, being intrinsically linked to Tony Blair’s leadership of the party - has moved away from Britain’s broad-based ‘progressive’ coalition to such an extent, that what was once the revisionist-right is now somewhere to the left of the contemporary Labour Party. This has happened because New Labour believes in a kind of historical determinism, understanding globalisation as an unquestionable process that demands of us a ‘continual modernisation’ or ‘permanent revolution’. It is my contention that this has led to a centralising and dogmatic political practice which stultifies political and intellectual pluralism and from which ‘progressives’ decisively dissent.

The British ‘Progressive Tradition’

According to David Marquand ‘Few can doubt that the crushing New Labour victory in May 1997 was a watershed in the history of the British progressive tradition. Yet its long-term significance is still swathed in mystery.’^[iii] But what is this ‘progressive tradition’? For Peter Joyce,

‘It is generally identified with the centre-left of the political spectrum, and embraces the objectives of social and political reform ... introduced within the explicit framework of the capitalist society, thus excluding those groups which advocate revolutionary change and upheaval.’^[iv]

In his book *The Progressive Dilemma* David Marquand focuses on the fact that since overtaking the Liberal Party as the major anti-Conservative political party in Great Britain, Labour has captured the support of only ‘part of the pre-1914 progressive coalition’^[v] and thus allowed the ‘Conservative Century’ to happen. J.M. Keynes asked, exasperatedly, ‘Why cannot the leaders of the Labour Party face the fact that they are not sectaries of an outworn creed, mumbling moss-grown demi-semi Fabian Marxism, but the heirs of eternal Liberalism?’ and this, according to Marquand, is the question which ‘sounds through the history of the British left like a tolling bell.’^[vi] Despite the occasional unsuccessful attempt to do so, Labour in the twentieth century failed to transcend ‘the limitations of the Labour culture, with its mixture of assertiveness and defensiveness, of sectional fragmentation and group loyalty, which had entered the bloodstream of its leaders and activists.’ It has been paradoxically conservative and ‘its lack of imagination, its propensity for heresy-hunting, its suspicion of new ideas – was the other side of the coin of the rhetorical radicalism which was part of the currency of Labour politics.’^[vii]

This mixture of conservatism and radicalism offended and repelled anti-Conservative but non-Labour constituencies as well as much of the ‘progressive’ intelligentsia. Britain’s two-party, winner-takes-all electoral system left these disenfranchised, unrepresented by and unable to support, the main anti-Conservative party. The result was Tory hegemony.

In his influential 1979 article *Inquest on a Movement*, Marquand pointed out the danger of failing to win over, or losing the support of the ‘radical intellectuals’:

‘Radical intellectuals did not bring many votes to the Labour Party, but they brought something more important. They could write; they could argue; some of them could even think. Above all, they could and did lay down the intellectual framework within which the battle for votes took place. They asked the questions which the politicians had to answer: and in asking the questions, they helped to determine what the answers would be.’^[viii]

And this is the ‘progressive tradition’: that section of British political thinkers and actors concerned to win back those sections of the population lost when Labour took over the ‘progressive’ mantle from Liberalism. It has sought to maintain and strengthen the link



between the Party and the radical intelligentsia and to sustain the environment within which radical thinking could develop. Such progressives have sought to forge a pluralist, diverse politics, described by Marquand as a 'marriage between social liberalism and social democracy, between Labour and Liberal traditions',^[x] between 'the communitarian, decentralist participatory radicalism to which the Liberal Democrats [are] heirs, and the communitarian, decentralist, participatory strands in the socialist inheritance'.^[xi] Marquand believes that such a political alignment is vital not only to keep the Conservatives out of office and solve the 'Progressive Dilemma', but also to draw out the best features of each political framework, balancing out the worst, and to create a genuinely 'progressive' politics:

'I would say that the best elements of the social democratic tradition are a commitment to solidarity and justice, and the realisation of these values through democratic processes. In the liberal tradition I would identify a commitment to personal autonomy, pluralism, diversity and a resistance to the ever-present danger of populist demagoguery and the 'tyranny of the majority'.^[xii]

Polly Toynbee has described the fundamental political positions shared by social democrats and social liberals as: 'a presumption in favour of the underdog; a belief that things can always get better; a trust in reason; taxing as much as you dare; tolerating almost anything except intolerance; striving for a more equal society; siding with the consumer; celebrating diversity'.^[xiii] In the introduction to their 2001 book *The Progressive Century*, Lawson and Sherlock argue that the 'contours of a progressive politics are rough but ready' and outline its five fundamental characteristics:^[xiv]

- 1 Its economic goal is egalitarian and therefore essentially social democratic.
- 2 The means of achieving it are politically pluralist and therefore essentially liberal.
- 3 Its instincts are socially liberal and anti-establishment
- 4 It is for capitalism but recognises the collective constraints necessary on powerful corporate interests – as such, there is a broad acceptance of the stakeholder model.
- 5 It has learnt the value of political professionalism from the US Democrats, but its heart and future lie with the political and moral economy of Europe .

This list of 5 points echoes Marquand's own list published in the 1999 collection of essays *The New Social Democracy*. Here Marquand describes this 'new paradigm' as having 'five key features' that stand out 'with reasonable clarity':^[xv]

- 1 It was broadly liberal in politics, but broadly social-democratic in economics.
- 2 It was for capitalism against socialism, but it implied profound changes in the architecture of British capitalism and a concomitant challenge to powerful corporate interests.
- 3 Though it drew heavily on American academic writing, its vision of the political and moral economy was much closer to those of mainland Europe than to that of the United States .
- 4 In the British context, at any rate, it was new...
- 5 Above all, it was pluralistic. It implied a multiplicity of power centres, economic and political; and it rejected the notion of a single modern condition to which there was a single route.

More recently, New Labour's 'critical friends'^[xvi] at Renewal positioned themselves as:^[xvii]

- **egalitarian** – increasing opportunity, redistributing resources and enhancing social inclusion;
- **pluralist** – developing power; working with and learning from other political forces and institutions in civil society;
- **and socially liberal** – protecting rights and freedoms wherever possible and promoting policies in tune with the diversity of communities and families.

The founding statement of Compass outlined a similar position in its eight point conclusion:^[xviii]

- We need an ideological vision of the good society to show politicians and voters where government is seeking to go: the richness of human potential in today's society requires both pluralism and egalitarianism to be embraced and combined in radical, distinctive ways by democratic left politics.
- Liberty demands equality: promoting freedom for all means closing the income, wealth and opportunity gap.
- Democracy must be cherished for its intrinsic worth and be revitalised: we need a change of culture to reconnect citizens and politicians.
- The public sphere must be reclaimed, public servants empowered and citizens engaged: the public service ethos must not be sacrificed to consumerism and new forms of public governance and innovation must be developed.
- Capitalism must be managed for the many, not the few: markets have their value but they should be regulated for the public good.

These position statements indicate a degree of ideological convergence between 'progressives'. Yet they do not seem particularly attached to the term. In September 2000 Marquand declared:

'I have a lot of trouble with the term 'progressive politics'. I once wrote a book called *The Progressive Dilemma* and taught a course called 'The Progressive Tradition'. These experiences convinced me that the term was vacuous, a hangover from the days when the self-defined 'left' saw itself as the vehicle of preordained historical change.'^[xviii]

Similarly Lawson describes his political bedfellows as 'social democrats or democratic socialists'^[xix]. He explains that 'We chose democratic left for Compass to encapsulate commitments to equality and democracy. But liberal socialist or even social liberal could work just as well.'^[xx]

This is indicative not of hesitancy or ambiguity but of the fact that these thinkers are all too aware of the dangers of adhering to a single homogenised version of a 'progressive' social democracy. As Marquand notes: 'There has never been a single social-democratic orthodoxy, and it would be astonishing if one were to develop in this time of bewildering flux. Now, even more than in previous decades, it is wiser to think of social democracies than of social democracy.'^[xxi] The various strands of the 'progressive tradition' are not tied together by a vision of the inevitability of progress but by shared principles concerning the direction in which they believe society should progress: Ideological pluralism, political pluralism, individual freedom, social liberalism, economic egalitarianism, constitutional subsidiarity and reform of the market.

These are some of the shared values of thinkers and organisations situated within the context of Marquand's 'progressive tradition'; a revised-social-democracy or social liberalism. They used to be clearly associated with the Labour Party. Why has this relationship changed?

'Progressives' and the Labour Party

Labour Party 'progressives' came out of the tradition of socialist revisionism and reformist social democracy championed by Anthony Crosland in his hugely significant 1956 work *The Future of Socialism*. Starting from 'the proposition that capitalism had been 'reformed almost out of existence' and entered an era of ineluctable growth', Crosland argued that 'the worst excesses of the market had been eliminated and it had become a 'reasonably satisfactory method' for distributing the 'great bulk of goods.'^[xxii] Crosland saw 'values and ideals as central to politics' but 'separated these from the means of achieving them'. He saw that 'means change as society changes...and the revisionist needs continually to examine the range of means available.'^[xxiii] It was Crosland who clarified equality as 'the fundamental value that divides the Labour Party from the Conservative Party'^[xxiv]

Crosland's egalitarianism depended upon economic growth and redistribution through taxation and public expenditure.^[xxv] But by the 1970s the 'central themes of economic policy, particularly the continued level and role of public expenditure within the context of economic decline' became divisive.^[xxvi] A 'liberal strand of Labour revisionism' emerged which 'favoured greater emphasis on economic growth and wealth creation as part of their wider appraisal of the future direction and priorities of social democracy'^[xxvii] leading to the Limehouse Declaration, the creation of the SDP and 'the deepest crisis in Labour history since the split of 1931.'^[xxviii] Later, Blair would confide to Paddy Ashdown that 'as he watched Roy Jenkins on television at that time, he wondered: 'Why aren't I in that party?''^[xxix] But he, like many others, stayed within the Party which, under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, reclaimed its stake in the 'progressive consensus' and it was in this context 'progressives' supported what would become Blair's New Labour project.

Lawson describes how he 'was an early and fulsome advocate of all things New Labour' having come to this view 'after a familiar journey for many in the Labour Party from a largely amorphous and romantic left position that became defined as the 'soft' left to differentiate it from 'hard' left Neanderthals. In the 1980s this soft left were Kinnockites, in the 1990s many, but not all, became Blairites.' The 1992 election defeat led to an atmosphere where 'those still on this journey would do pretty much anything to win.'^[xxx] Thanks to the tactical skills and Party reforms of Neil Kinnock and later John Smith and Tony Blair, and the merging of the SDP and Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats, many former SDP supporters who had previously left Labour returned to the party and the radical intelligentsia drifted back, including Marquand who became a LibDem when the SDP split between the merger-inclined Jenkinsites and the Owenites but rejoined Labour following Blair's election as leader.^[xxxi]

After the 1992 Conservative victory John Smith's 'Independent Commission on Social Justice and the 'Dahrendorf' Commission on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion, set up by Paddy Ashdown, 'struck essentially the same chords.'^[xxxii] At the same time, Will Hutton outlined the 'Stakeholder Society' in his work *The State We're In*, based around a 'new Keynesian' approach to economics directly responding to the neo-liberalism of Margaret Thatcher's governments. Echoing Marquand he argued that 'The way forward for the centre and the left is to reawaken a long and honourable progressive tradition, which splintered in the early years of the twentieth century.' Hutton felt that 'If the centre and the liberal-left can reawaken the tradition of British liberalism that was sundered by



twentieth-century socialism, there is every chance that these 'stakeholder' prescriptions will be fulfilled in the years ahead.^[xxxiii] The excitement surrounding Hutton's work was such that during a speech in Singapore, Blair described 'the implications of creating a stakeholder economy' as 'profound.' Indeed, for a while it appeared "stakeholderism" was to be the new mantra of New Labour, and that corporate power would be challenged by a New Labour government keen to bring workers into the equation.^[xxxiv] However 'stakeholder capitalism' quickly left the New Labour agenda, as other political philosophies pertaining to be the answer for a revived British radicalism came in and out of Blair's favour and Anthony Giddens 'tried to directly link his wider Third Way theory to a programmatic outline for New Labour.'^[xxxv]

New Labour in Power

By 1997 the party had repositioned itself so that 'the electoral and rhetorical territory which the SDP had set out to occupy was unmistakably under "new" Labour control.'^[xxxvi] The election of that year was, in Marquand's terms 'manifestly a contest between Conservatives and non-Conservatives, in a sense which had not been true since the 1960s.'^[xxxvii] Tony Blair mobilised and led an anti-Conservative electoral coalition which, while centred on the Labour Party, extended well beyond it. Furthermore, 'the Labour leadership talked the language of progressivism. Blair made overtures to the Liberal Democrats which he had no need to make.'^[xxxviii] The Cook-Maclennan Agreement, 'led to the most extensive package of reforms ever offered to the British electorate in one election' and 'codified' the 'consensus position of progressive reformers at the time.'^[xxxix] In the run up to the election, 'radicals on the centre-left came away from meetings with [Blair] convinced that his programme was not only a gourmet feast, but innovative and original in its conception.'^[xl] So it was that in the warm glow of 1997, it appeared that when asking if the 'progressive dilemma' was finally moving to a point of resolution, Marquand believed 'there [was] a strong case for saying 'yes.'^[xli]

That was then. Where once, following the 2001 election, Marquand declared of Blair that 'He may not be a socialist, but no Labour leader has ever been more anti-Conservative.'^[xlii] now he mockingly declares him 'a quintessential populist...in the sense that he believes deep down that he in some mysterious, mystical way is the incarnation of the popular will.'^[xliii] Marquand believes that today's radical intellectuals are as appalled by New Labour 'as much as the Lloyd George coalition's unprincipled opportunism appalled their great grandfathers and the quasi-Marxism enrages of the 1970s appalled their fathers and elder brothers.'^[xliv] Labour under Blair, 'is a very different creature from the diverse, pluralistic coalition to which the post-mortems of 1992 had seemed to point... There are few traces of Thomas Paine in his coalition, and fewer of William Morris.' For Marquand, Labour 'has changed a great deal under Blair, but not in the way that those who looked forward to a new progressive coalition thought necessary.' While 'Blair and his allies talk the language of progressivism more enthusiastically than any political leader since the First World War,' their 'progressive' credentials 'and the nature and meaning of their project, are in doubt.'^[xlv]

Toynbee, despite staying a strong and vocal supporter of Labour, has shown her disappointment, declaring that 'New Labour is now to the right of the SDP...formed in 1981' and 'more authoritarian.'^[xlvi] The once proudly Blairite Lawson now feels naive to have believed New Labour's rhetoric about being 'in favour of a new politics', describing his feelings as 'like the breakdown of a marriage. I really wanted New Labour to work.' Now he outlines a nightmare scenario:

'I believe there are fundamental lessons to be learnt about the systematic failings of New Labour and that unless these are learnt quickly the party's period in office will be defined by Iraq. It will fail to reach anything like the potential and hope that was invested in it to shift Britain to the left in the way Thatcher shifted it to the right. It will leave behind a more unequal and less democratic country and the Labour Party itself will be left in the same state as the Tories in 1997 - out of office with a rump membership incapable of renewing itself.'^[xlvii]

Exploring New Labour's 'Modern Way'

Blairism sold itself as the antithesis of old Labour and its confusion of 'means' with 'ends'. For it, 'what counts is what works',^[xlviii] arguing that Labour 'has in reality never attempted to do more than ameliorate the worst excesses of capitalist society [and] is trying to do so still, sobered by the understanding that Thatcherite Conservatism found a real echo in the minds of the British people.'^[xlix] And at first sight, Blair's version of social democracy does appear to have achieved a great deal. 'Progressive' measures have included ensuring statutory recognition of trade unions and the minimum wage,^[l] while an excited Observer editorial exalted Gordon Brown's 2002 budget as 'the most significant restatement of the British social democratic tradition for a generation.'^[li] Steven Fielding flags up Brown's modification of tax rates 'to facilitate a modest redistribution of wealth from rich to poor'^[lii] and Peter Hyman cites the ending of child poverty, full employment, reform of secondary schools, rebuilding the NHS and rebalancing the Criminal Justice System.^[liii]

But for its critics a paradoxical effect of the 1997 landslide victory was that it 'constrained the potential for progressive politics.'^[liiv] New Labour's enormous majority left the Party defending constituencies and people who had nothing in common with the goals of the British centre-left: 'Labour Britain now includes Crosby as well as Caerphilly, Edgbaston as well as Easington, West Harrow as well as

East Hull, Hove as well as Hemsworth, St. Albans as well as Sedgefield.^[lv] The great achievement of Tony Blair's party was 'to capture large swathes of Conservative Britain by the exercise of charisma and will'^[lv] but this has brought with it the desire to continue courting these new, unreliable, conservative Labour voters. For New Labour, old Labour voters 'whose defection seems unimaginable, hardly figure in its calculations'^[lvii] At each election it has continued to work by the Baxter Assumption that the pattern of anti-Tory tactical voting of 1997 and 2001 'won't break down.'^[lviii] New Labour feels it need only play for right-wing votes, using policy 'triangulation' to steal Conservative ground and voters. Johann Hari describes how in government New Labour have 'always put their right-wing policies up front and in your face. Their progressive policies come later, quieter, in a slow shuffle.'^[lx] This strategy has been celebrated by Peter Hain MP who, despite declaring that Labour 'must shout louder' about its 'progressive record'^[lx] also believes triangulation has allowed Labour to 'introduce radical change without frightening the horses.'^[lx]

But the problem with triangulation, as Angela Eagle MP has noted, is that following 'a period of right-wing ascendancy, to which the centre-left will have already accommodated by definition, a tactic of triangulation will produce a more right wing solution than would otherwise be the case.'^[lxii] Indeed 'triangulation, and adopting the rhetoric of the right, has meant that many of the left's frames [defining a problem and setting the language in which it is discussed, thereby predetermining the answer] are underdeveloped in the minds of the public.'^[lxiii] Lawson and Sherlock point out that the 'tap of radicalism cannot just be turned off and on at the whim of party leaders. Radical politics requires support within civil society, the voluntary sector and local communities, support that needs to be built, nurtured and encouraged.'^[lxiv] But this nurturing has not taken place, Blair having 'made very little effort to convince the public that [his] progressive policies are necessary.' Consequently New Labour has failed to build or sustain a constituency of support for progress and when tentative, silent nudges of society to the left are made, there is a real danger they could be swiftly abolished when the Conservatives inevitably return to power. Hari deplores Blair for having 'reinforced much Thatcherite "common sense" and manufactured far too little of his own.' Private ownership of all major industries and weaker trade union powers, both major parts of the Thatcher Legacy have been absorbed into Britain's cross-party consensus. Yet apart from the minimum wage – 'now accepted by all parties and a major achievement' – and an inconsistent start to devolution, Blair's government has no similar cross-party legacy:^[A] 'future Tory government could abolish tax credit and dismantle programmes like Sure Start, and most of the country wouldn't blink...'. Writing at the time of the 2005 Queen's Speech, Hari lamented that the programme laid out by Labour 'did not sound like the programme for a progressive government just six months away from a general election... in the space marked "Things that will upset right-wingers", there is nothing'. For Hari, the Queen's Speech was, 'a programme that any pragmatic centre-right government could be proud of.'^[lxv]

Marquand sees this governmental conservatism leading to a split between the 'progressive intelligentsia' and New Labour, exactly as the 1980s saw a split with Foot's Labour: 'The big difference is that this time there is no SDP to offer radical intellectuals a refuge and a hope. There are only the Liberal Democrats – honourable people, with good liberal instincts, but without an idea to rub between them.'^[lxvi] In an article warning that 'the anti-Tory coalition is falling apart,' Nick Cohen warns that 'The herd of independent minds has mooed and moved on. Apart from the hired help of the Murdoch press, Tony Blair has precious little intellectual support.'^[lxvii] Intellectual pluralism is stifled. But is New Labour's failure to advocate progressive values simply due to electoral strategy? Are New Labour, as Andrew Rawnsley suggests, 'social democrats trapped in the closet... who, for reasons historical and electoral, rarely dare squeak their true convictions?'^[lxviii] Or does this reticence conceal more profound philosophical/ideological commitments? Marquand certainly believes so, warning that 'if you look hard you will see the cloven hooves of statism and determinism peeping out from under new Labour's designer jeans.' And while 'the determinist hoof is less obtrusive than the statist one... it is equally menacing.'^[lxix] Marquand sees a New Labour 'myth' guiding policy:

'The world is new, the past has no echoes, modernity is unproblematic, the path to the future is linear. There is one modern condition, which all rational people would embrace if they knew what it was. The Blairites do know ... (New Labour) is up-to-date and clear-eyed – at once modernised and modernising, unencumbered by history and with the wind of victory in its sails.'^[lxx]

Blair has declared that New Labour is 'beyond Left and Right: the product of a post-ideological, 'anti-political' age interested in pragmatic perspectives, in what works rather than what is dogmatically right.'^[lxxi] Fielding notes how Blair has 'justified the need for change with reference to the transformation of economy and society'^[lxxii] and Blair himself argues that 'in a time of unprecedented aspirations, declining deference and increasing choice, of diverse needs and greater personal autonomy'^[lxxiii] public services need to move 'beyond the outdated mass production approach that too often characterised [them] after 1945'.^[lxxiv] In Blair's words, 'the rate of economic, political, industrial and social change is quicker than at any time in our history',^[lxxv] the cause being 'globalization, which he considers both 'inevitable' and 'desirable'.^[lxxvi] Blair declares that these statements still place New Labour within the boundaries of the reformist 'progressive' tradition. Marquand disagrees, arguing instead 'that New Labour has 'modernised' the social-democratic tradition out of all recognition.'^[lxxvii]

For Marquand, what New Labour's modernisation rhetoric really means 'is that Blair and his associates have absorbed some of the



central tenets of the neo-liberalism of the recent past – the propositions that there is one modern condition, which all rational people will recognise once it is pointed out to them; that the renascent capitalism of our day embodies that condition; and that resistance to it is futile.^[bxxxvii] What has changed is not the ‘fact’ of determinism, but its direction. In the early days ‘History with a capital “h” was thought to be moving towards collectivism. Now, it is assumed to be moving away from it. But though the direction of History’s path has changed, its assumed nature has not. For new Labour as for old Labour, it is proceeding inexorably and ineluctably towards a known and unchanging goal.’ Now, instead of collectivism, ‘Individualism, consumerism, capitalism and globalisation are the wave of the future and it is pointless to resist them.’^[bxxxix] The victory of consumer-capitalism is inevitable. For New Labour the ‘most that public policy can do is to help the society and economy to ‘adapt’ to this condition with as little pain and as much competitive edge as possible.’^[bxxx] This means an unswerving belief in the market.

Scrutinising Labour’s 2005 election manifesto, Alan Finlayson comes to the conclusion that ‘New Labour has a series of initiatives, a policy programme without a political philosophy, an addiction to change with little sense of where we came from or where we might go (as a party, as a country, as a species) only that we have to keep going, keep adapting, keep changing.’ Finlayson describes the situation thus: ‘the New Labour mindset ... does not believe anything so last century as that the ends justify the means. The means have become the end. The end is nothing other than the continuation of the means.’ The outcome is that ‘New Labour does not lack a programme. That is all it has. That is all it is.’^[bxxxii] Initially this seems harsh, especially when judged against Blair’s own statement of principle in the 2005 manifesto:

‘Our case rests on one idea more than any other – that it is the duty of government to provide opportunity and security for all in a changing world. Every chapter relates back to that goal breaking down the barriers that stop people fulfilling their talent, extending opportunity to every corner of the United Kingdom, building communities strong and safe for those who play by the rules.’^[lxxxii]

This isn’t a new mantra, Blair has been making this case since before becoming Labour leader: in the new economy “people are the resource that matters’ ... they must be ‘liberated to fulfil their potential’ and ... in being so liberated they will contribute to the economic prosperity of the nation in a never-ending virtuous circle.’ But Finlayson argues that ‘politically and intellectually’ this fails to live up to ‘a statement of a guiding philosophy for it is about means not end’. He continues:

‘Socialists and social democrats do not place at the centre of their philosophy the idea that government has a duty to protect all but the idea that we all have a duty to protect each other. Government is a necessary mechanism but a far from sufficient condition. Blair articulates a secondary principle as if it were primary and then subordinates it to his obsession with ‘change’.^[bxxxiii]

In an echo of Marxian determinism Philip Gould has argued that the twenty-first century ‘will be “an age of permanent revolutions” ... in which “unceasing modernisation” will hold the key to political success.’^[bxxxiv] Meaning, ‘modernisation is a continuous process – a permanent revolution’.^[bxxxv] According to Finlayson this commitment to ‘permanent revolution’ means that ‘New Labour sees no need for a clear, fixed, conception to underlie and unite party, policy and constituency.’^[bxxxvi] Instead we have the language of ‘modernisation’, the linchpin of Blair’s political language. He describes the modernisation agenda as generating ‘an appearance of structured and unified thinking beyond which is either nonsense or (by implication) out-dated thinking’ and helping ‘to render ‘natural’ and un-contestable that which is not necessarily so.’ By using the same word ‘to describe constitutional reform, changes to the police force, health service and educational system, it seems that some sort of coherent approach is underpinning policy’.^[bxxxvii] But the only uniting factor is belief in change – a mechanism, not an end!

This is what Marquand dismisses as ‘the social determinism that Isaiah Berlin once savaged as a ‘theodicy’ ... designed to justify what might otherwise appear to be evils by an appeal to a higher power – no longer God, but history ... ‘offering’ a route out of the painful realm of choice and moral argument, and into the comforting realm of necessity.’ In a scathing attack on New Labour’s right to even call itself social-democratic, Marquand declares that its market determinism, justified by the unstable rhetorical trope of ‘modernisation’ is ‘a negation of the commitment to human autonomy which has differentiated the social-democratic tradition from mechanistic Marxism on the one hand and High Tory traditionalism on the other.’^[bxxxviii] With ‘what counts is what works’ a false conception of necessity trumps morality and ‘determinism stultifies the imagination, narrows the room for debate, impoverishes political language and closes off alternative futures...’^[bxxxix] But, ‘There were other paths, which it could have explored. Instead, it closed them off.’^[xc]

Marquand and others agree with Blair that modern circumstances mean that ‘hierarchical, statist, command and control systems are no longer viable.’^[xci] They recognise that, ‘the instruments which the revisionist social democrats of the 1960s and 1970s used to realise their values broke in the hands of the governments which relied upon them’ and that if ‘the social-democratic rebirth is to be more than a flash in the pan, their revisionism will have to be revised.’^[xcii] Yet for ‘progressives’, believing as they do in the importance of intellectual pluralism, New Labour’s centralised and pre-determined mentality has led to a failure to implement ‘progressive goals’.

Another area of contention for reformist social democrats has been the tribalist, 'Labourist' nature of the Labour Party, described by Lawson as 'often arrogant, statist and centralising', and 'Parliamentary Leninism'.^[xcii] It did once seem that Blair's leadership might bring about a more pluralist politics. He 'frequently highlighted the links between new Labour and the pre-1914 alliance of Liberals and Labour, and the costs of the split between those two'^[xciv] and in a 1995 speech described 'democratic socialism and progressive liberalism as 'cousins' implying 'neither was further up the evolutionary chain than the other.' This nod to the liberal as well as social tradition went back to the period of John Smith's leadership when Blair and LibDem leader Paddy Ashdown met privately 'to discuss fostering cooperation.'^[xcv] Ashdown recalls that during these meetings Blair talked of the 'desperate need to reformulate the politics of the left'^[xcvi] while in later discussions when Blair was leader, he spoke of 'rearranging the centre-left of British politics' so that Labour and Liberal 'could come back together again'.^[xcvii] But as previously argued, the landslide Labour victory brought problems for this 'progressive' and 'pluralist' option, 'weakening the new Prime Minister's resolve.'^[xcviii]

Blair didn't offer Ashdown membership of the cabinet but did create an unprecedented Joint Cabinet Committee which met every two months, had an equal number of Labour and LibDem representatives as members and a remit to discuss constitutional change. As early as December 1997 the Government confounded cynics by established an independent commission chaired by the LibDem peer and SDP founder Roy Jenkins with the objective of recommending an alternative to FPTP. The Jenkins Commission reported in October 1998, proposing a system of 'AV plus', that 'was the most Labour could accept and the least LibDems would tolerate'. Despite having promised Ashdown that he would immediately set in motion the process for holding a referendum, as well as announce his support for Jenkins' findings upon publication, Blair merely 'warmly' welcomed the report and 'did not amend his publicly sceptical view and left the question of a referendum open.' The fact was, 'without the Labour leader's unqualified and public support reform could not happen'. For Blair, electoral reform for Westminster was 'ultimately desirable' but 'not of immediate importance'.^[xcix] The report was shelved and to the dismay of reformers not since re-opened.

At the 2005 election 'Labour formed a Government with the smallest share of the vote for more than 100 years', winning a majority with only 36% of the vote.^[c] Polly Toynbee called for rebellion arguing that such a low vote was 'not legitimacy'. In an attack on the failure of Labour MPs to stand up for a fairer electoral system Toynbee recalled how the late Robin Cook 'used to cast a beady eye on politicians agonising over low turnout while refusing to risk their seats to proportional representation. He used to point out how our system lets the votes of the poor be ignored, stacked up in moribund safe seats.'^[c] But there was no rebellion. Peter Hain is one of the few ministers to speak out in favour of PR, announcing in a Tribune interview in 2004 that he supported the alternative vote (AV) system^[c] arguing that 'political disengagement can only be tackled if we first ensure our system of government is democratic...facing up to the need for electoral reform.'^[cm] Other senior Labour figures have remained quiet on the issue.

The government did introduce forms of PR for elections for the European Parliament, as well as mixed systems for contests in the newly devolved governments in Wales, Scotland and London. But in January 1999 Ashdown announced his resignation as LibDem leader and under the leadership of Charles Kennedy, and especially since the Iraq War, the relationship between New Labour and the LibDems cooled and hardened. Marquand and others argue that New Labour tribalism has meant the party is incapable of working closely with the LibDems, as 'Labour leaders 'are' still imbued with the majoritarian, winner-takes all assumptions central to British parliamentary government since the late nineteenth century.'^[cm] Summing up New Labour's early relationship with the LibDems Fielding notes 'It is certainly salutary to compare how much Blair promised the LibDems when he thought he needed their support with how little he gave them once he realized he did not.'^[cv]

In Scotland and Wales Labour and LibDem did enter coalition government together. With devolution we find Labour's biggest and most vivid example of legislation for 'political pluralism'. Yet even here New Labour's centralising, controlling nature got the better of them: Blair campaigned against the hugely popular Rhodri Morgan in Wales and in London worked against Ken Livingstone. But the new governmental structures in Wales, Scotland and London have created new centres of political power and allowed dissenting Labour voices from Blairism to speak up. In Wales Morgan has criticised Government policies on defence, pensions, "respect" and on the rights of Welsh MPs to vote on English issues.^[cvi] Morgan sees 'fundamental differences' between the WAG and New Labour, talking of 'clear red water' dividing policy in Wales and Westminster^[cvi] and in 2005 praised the Assembly's 'real Labour budget'.^[cviii]

Finlayson notes the importance of such differences: 'If more in England knew the full extent of the ideological and policy differences of the differing national parties in the UK, new Labour would be weaker still.' The differences in the Welsh and Scottish Labour 2005 manifestos, he argues, are evidence that 'the party is fragmenting in many ways and Welsh Labour and Scottish Labour are becoming ever more different entities...we should be clear that the Scottish and Welsh manifestos are not to be understood as differing from the English one, as if it were the definitive version and the others merely revisions for the secondary nations. They are manifestos in their own right. Each national party has made its own choices and each could have chosen differently,' Finlayson argues that while Blair's determinist rhetoric tends to imply that 'there is no alternative to what he says must be done' devolution clearly refutes this: 'I live in Wales and every time I pay for a prescription I know that this is untrue.'^{[cix][cx]} Prescription charges have fallen in Wales since devolution and in spring of 2007 will be free. At the same time, it should also be noted there is a certain disquiet also that over all



spending on the health service is lower in Wales than England. These two points are important, acting as they do to highlight the fact that different directions are being taken in policy – that a different debate is taken place in Wales than England.

Yet although we have seen power devolved to Scotland, Wales and London, there has yet to be a concomitant 'culture of a new politics': Unresolved issues including local government, the regions and the House of Lords. Marquand described the British constitutional revolution set off by Blair as 'a revolution without a theory...the muddled, messy work of practical men and women, unintellectual when not positively anti-intellectual...a revolution of sleepwalkers who don't know quite where they're going or why.'^[cxi] New Labour doesn't have the decentralising instincts necessary for an intellectual response. Lawson believes that New Labour not only failed to rid itself of its centralising culture but 'deepened it because of an anxiety that so few in the party really understood what the 'project' was all about and therefore could not be trusted.' Nowhere is this more obvious than the New Labour leadership itself where 'powers were centralised even more tightly around the Prime Ministers office – who became in effect not just PM but Secretary of State for Education and Foreign Secretary. Gordon Brown ran not just the Treasury but pensions and transport. Turf battles have been fought out over trade and industry and health.'^[cxii] As Finlayson puts it: 'New Labour does not like politics very much and certainly doesn't like it to happen outside its purview. It would prefer to imagine a permanent consensus under its permanent management.'^[cxiii]

For those longing for a 'progressive' politics, New Labour has been a disappointment, and the future of what small time is left under Blair brings little hope of change. In the Renewal editorial following Blair's 2005 February conference Thompson and Lawson judged Blair's conference speech as articulating 'his boldest embrace of markets, the neo-liberal order and its entire works', showing both of the tenets identified above – permanent modernisation and the primacy of New Labour – with the clear message that 'the relentless pace of global and domestic change means that we must prepare for it, adapt to it or die and that only Tony Blair understands this challenge and can lead us through it.'^[cxiv] Zygmunt Bauman asks us to 'listen to our current and would-be ministers and their spokespeople' and, echoing Renewal, opines that 'They sing in many voices, but there is a common motif in all the tunes: modernize, modernize, change or perish.'^[cxv] For Renewal:

'Blair's legacy won't be the realignment of British politics, placing our country at the heart of a social Europe, or a more equal society. The poor will still be with us and the rich untouchable...Britain will not be modern, new or the kind of significant break from Thatcherism that we and most Labour supporters wished for.'^[cxvi]

Worse, as Marquand describes, although 'social democracy of a sort is still in power...its moral authority is ebbing by the day.' For a technocratic Labour Party with no clear values beyond a belief in 'modernisation' and change, all that remains is 'the dreary small change of public service "reform"'. The prospect of more of the same – an endless vista of pettifogging change for change's sake, imposed by bossy micromanagement at the centre – sends shivers down the spine of the radical intelligentsia and, increasingly, down the spine of all British people.'^[cxvii] While 'more effective technocratic management is better than ineffective technocratic management ... it will not save Labour from eventual political meltdown.'^[cxviii] The danger for New Labour, as Finlayson states, is that 'when a house is built on sand it is always washed away completely.'^[cxix]

Conclusion

There now exists an intellectual vacuum between the continuation of Blairism and the hard left. It is this vacuum 'progressives' must fill, offering a revised social democratic response that, in Leggett's description, aims to 'complete the unfinished business of modernising social democracy.'^[cxx] We now have the opportunity, in the words of Will Leggett, 'to complete the modernisation of social democracy, but with a more progressive content than the Third Way ... introducing aspects of both the liberal and egalitarian political traditions that are neglected by the Third Way at present.'^[cxxi]

Labour must rediscover its values, recognising that as Geoff Mulgan puts it, 'any party wanting to renew itself has to remember what motivated its members in the first place, what made them angry or hopeful enough to put up with the dull grind of leaflets and committees. Values are the renewable energies of politics, and ... likely to be essential resources for renewal.'^[cxxii] But it is also important that the Party realises that 'while the future of the left rests on the values of the past it will not be built on the methods of the past.'^[cxxiii] There can be no return to the 'centralising and potentially authoritarian elements of traditional social democracy.'^[cxxiv] For such a shift to take place, the Labour Party has to change. More than anything else a 'progressive' Labour leadership needs a new way of thinking, removed from the present neo-liberal 'common sense'. Now is the time to set our own agendas and define our own spaces. There is more than one path to 'modernity', any other view closes off debate, killing ideas.

This means ditching New Labour's determinist attitude to the market and embracing political pluralism. Unlike New Labour's acceptance of the rule of markets, where the 'most that public policy can do is to help the society and economy to 'adapt' to this

condition with as little pain and as much competitive edge as possible,^[cxxxv] the task is, as Marquand argues, 'to return [the market] to the servitude which the builders of the post-war mixed economy imposed on it, and from which it has now escaped.'^[cxxxvi] Political pluralism 'requires building alliances, decentralising power and empowering both groups and individuals to take part in governance and problem solving.'^[cxxxvii] A 'progressive' social democratic government would create 'a greater devolution of political decision-making' with greater emphasis placed on 'the intermediary institutions of civil society than was the case in statist versions of social democracy, and in the contemporary 'New Labour' Third Way'.^[cxxxviii] It must create 'a constitutional framework which can promote pluralism and diversity, within which the claims of equity can be pursued.'^[cxxxix] These are just a few, general points of change, but the result would be a step towards a more 'progressive' Labour Party committed to ideological pluralism and intellectual freedom.

As we move through the remaining days and weeks of Tony Blair's leadership, we shall have to wait to see if, once leader, the new agenda of Gordon Brown will embrace a more progressive future. After all, Brown has frequently spoken of his desire to build a 'progressive consensus'.^[cxxx] Failure to do so will have lasting consequences for Labour, as a party and as a Government and for the people of Britain .



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