Guest editorial

Can One Nation Labour learn from the British New Left?

Madeleine Davis

The early British New Left – a vibrant activist and intellectual current that flourished between 1956 and 1963 and whose brief lifespan encompassed the early careers of many of the most important British socialist intellectuals of the last half-century – has made an unexpected recent return to the political stage. In the ongoing discussion about ideological renewal within the British Labour Party, figures associated with the 'Blue' and latterly 'One Nation' Labour tendencies, particularly Jon Cruddas and his collaborator Jonathan Rutherford, have cited the ideas of prominent New Leftists, most often Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams, in support of their arguments for a politics that seeks to re-connect Labour traditions to English culture and society (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2010; Rutherford, 2011).

On 27 June 2012, a conference in Westminster brought representatives of these two currents together. With contributions from historians of the New Left and of Labour, as well as figures involved in policy-making or implementation, the conference explored commonalities and differences and posed the question: what, if anything, is of value in an engagement between these two intellectual traditions? This special issue reproduces revised versions of three of the contributions made to that conference, those by Jonathan Rutherford, labour movement historian Mark Wickham-Jones, and longstanding activist and intellectual of the New Left and founder-editor of *Soundings*, Michael Rustin. It also includes a fourth piece solicited subsequently from Michael Kenny, author of the key study of the early New Left's political thought, and currently working on a major study of the politics of English nationhood (Kenny, 1995). All would wish to acknowledge with gratitude the contributions to the day's discussion of a distinguished line-up of speakers, including Hilary Wainwright, Anthony Barnett, Maurice Glasman, Michael Walzer, Robin Archer, Nick Stevenson, Paul Nowak, Tess Lanning, Marc Stears and Jon Cruddas.

The New Left as a source for Labour's ideological renewal

At first sight the New Left may appear an unlikely source from which to draw inspiration for contemporary debates within Labour. 'A plague o' both your houses' described its attitude to the twin 'declining orthodoxies' of Stalinism and social democracy, and it produced some of the sharpest and best-known critiques of the Labour Party and its role in British politics. For the most part it viewed 'Labourism' (a term denoting the structural subordination of Labour within the British state and constitutional order) as a positive obstacle to the development of the authentically socialist politics it sought to foster

(Miliband, 1961; Nairn, 1964a, b and c; Davis, 2003). Yet in none of its manifestations did it offer any lasting or definite resolution to the strategic and organisational dilemma that this conviction posed, and in its own – rather intermittent – political practice the New Left repeatedly faltered over the question of whether to sponsor any initiative in direct competition with Labour, even when most convinced of the necessity to do so.

Critics of the New Left's political incapacity have sometimes presented this as intellectual dilettantism, or a refusal to put principle to the test of reality, but it is more accurately grasped as a genuine and deep ambivalence. For the question of its relationship to the Labour Party bedevilled the New Left from its inception in 1956, when resignees from the British Communist Party, notably Marxist historians Edward Thompson and John Saville, formed the earliest of the milieu's key journals, *The New Reasoner*. Joining forces with a younger group of independent socialists that included Stuart Hall, then a doctoral student at Oxford; philosopher Charles Taylor; and energetic student radical Raphael (Ralph) Samuel, who had established *Universities and Left Review* in 1957, the two journals merged as *New Left Review* (*NLR*) in 1960, picking up Ralph Miliband and Raymond Williams – two key figures not fitting neatly into either group – along the way. From 'parallelism' – the 'one foot in, one foot out' position adopted by the early New Left circa 1959 as they sought to challenge the influence of Croslandite revisionism within the party – through to the critical support offered in the early 1980s to Bennism, and even notwithstanding the 'let it bleed' approach to Labour of the *NLR* in its most *Trotskisant* phase, the New Left never resolved this conundrum and – arguably – never entirely gave up on its early efforts to influence the party from the left.

The Labour Party, of course, paid far less attention to the New Left than the New Left paid to it; nor has the New Left critique of Labour attracted much serious attention from historians of the Labour Party (1). To see Jon Cruddas acknowledge the importance for Labour of its encounters with critical traditions 'half in, half out' of the party, therefore, as he did at the final plenary of last year's conference, is surely welcome. Yet doubts remain. Can such an encounter move beyond an opportunistic and selective appropriation to provide a meaningful engagement?

The first – and highly complementary – pair of papers in this collection go to the heart of this issue. Jonathan Rutherford gives a suggestive evocation of the New Left, its project, achievements and limitations that draws some direct comparisons with 'Blue Labour'. Drawing on Jed Esty's reinterpretation of English cultural modernism (2003), Rutherford contends that both these traditions represent an 'effort to frame a specifically English modernity rooted in the radical and conservative traditions of common life'. What he emphasises as of most value in the 'first' New Left – he is far more dismissive of the 'second' *NLR* which eschewed all 'parochialism' and looked instead to continental Marxism – is the 'culture and society' tradition of Raymond Williams, and Edward Thompson's humanist insistence on the importance of the moral imagination. It is this 'English modernity of virtue, humanism and democratic culture', and the New Left's incomplete reworking of the English cultural inheritance, to which 'Blue Labour' is seen as heir.

Esty, however, arguably overplays the congruity between the New Left's oppositional stance and more conservative manifestations of literary and cultural modernism such as those of Leavis and Eliot. It is also worth reminding ourselves just how controversial these issues were within the early New Left itself. Williams' idea of a 'common culture', or of culture as a 'whole way of life', was sharply criticised by Thompson precisely as not doing enough to transcend Eliot's conservative and complacent evocation of English traditions. Culture, Thompson reminded him (and it was a criticism Williams broadly accepted) was a 'whole way of struggle', and the struggle was between class-situated agents (Williams,

1958 and 1961; Thompson, 1961). This is a theme developed by Michael Kenny in the second piece presented here. In a nuanced consideration of the possibilities and implications of the 'progressive patriotism' of Thompson, Kenny reminds us that 'reclaiming English culture and customs for a progressive kind of politics ... involved [for Thompson] the combined exercise of countless individual wills and imaginations, and implied a willingness by radicals to tackle the inequalities of power, wealth and status which were fortified by conservative accounts of the nation'. Though concluding that today's 'progressive patriots' around 'One Nation Labour' should indeed draw inspiration from Thompson, Kenny suggests the latter would – just as he warned Williams – again counsel against 'too great an accommodation with political forms of conservatism'.

The second pair of papers focuses on aspects of the New Left's project that have to date received far less attention than those discussed by Rutherford and Kenny, but which are no less relevant to an assessment of the New Left's contemporary significance and its relationship to Labour traditions. Challenging a prevalent view that sees the New Left as having little to offer by way of an alternative to Croslandite revisionism, Mark Wickham-Jones reappraises one of the most neglected aspects of the early New Left's work – its economic analysis. While conceding that the New Left produced no single volume to rival Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956), he nevertheless contends that the challenge to the revisionist prospectus it made through a series of pieces in early journals and wider left publications was consistent and serious. New Left thinkers refuted the hypotheses of a 'managerial revolution' and of the 'separation of ownership and control' that underpinned Crosland's framework. They advanced new arguments for common ownership, advocating the extension of industrial democracy as a corrective and alternative to the bureaucratic Morrisonian model. They developed proposals for reform of union practices and even a detailed 'Socialist Wages Plan'. Wickham-Jones' analysis provides evidence for the contention that the New Left did indeed present an alternative direction for a reorientation of socialism to rival Crosland's, even if not in the form of an 'overall connected analysis'.

A New Left intervention that precisely set out to provide an 'overall connected analysis' is the subject of the final piece of the four, by Michael Rustin. The product of a recombination of members of the early New Left motivated by their deep disappointment in the Wilson government, the May Day Manifesto Movement of 1967-9 (Thompson, Williams and Hall were key figures along with a younger group that included Rustin himself) attempted to present a coherent 'socialist alternative' to the policies pursued by Labour in government, and a challenge to what was seen as its regressive, superficial and technocratic 'modernisation' (Williams, 1968) (2). If the explicitly socialist frame of reference reminds us how far the terms of debate have shifted, Rustin nevertheless sees contemporary relevance in the New Left's characteristic rejection of the 'willed separation of issues' (on which capitalism depended and in which Labour acquiesced) in favour of an analysis of system crises or, in Gramscian terms, 'conjunctures'. Indeed it is with the aim of sponsoring 'a broader thinking and mapping process ... to influence and inform the current political process' that a new *Soundings* Manifesto has recently been launched, alongside a republication of the original May Day Manifesto.

What shines out of the discussion offered by these four rich papers is the quality and range of the New Left's work. Though of course not without its failures, contradictions, and limitations, it remains one of the most creative intellectual and political currents the British left has produced. A reappraisal by figures within Labour of this often neglected contribution is therefore welcome. Thinkers of 'One Nation Labour' are right to sense the enduring value of the New Left's attempt to root a revitalised left project in contemporary English culture and society, and right too to see in the democratic, humanist and communitarian

emphases of the early New Left a valuable 'road not taken', worth renewed exploration. Yet it may also be, as Geoff Andrews (1999) warned in a similar moment of encounter between the New Left and New Labour some years ago, that a search for similarities is rather less useful than retaining the legacy of the New Left as a source of critique.

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Notes

1. Exceptions are Jackson (2007) and Foote (1985).
2. The first version was published in 1967 as *New Left May Day Manifesto*. An expanded version appeared as a Penguin special the following year (Williams, 1968).