

# Guest editorial

## Blue Labour, One Nation Labour, and the lessons of history

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With the clock ticking down to the next election the Labour Party faces big questions about how to construct an attractive, plausible alternative to the politics of the Coalition. It needs a narrative which blames the economic crash of 2008-12 on unfettered capitalism rather than alleged Labour profligacy, but more than that it needs a vision of the future that can capture voters' imagination and persuade them that Labour can make a difference in tough times. The debates of the past three years have thrown up many powerful ideas which seek to provide both narrative and vision. Maurice Glasman's Blue Labour project began this process by declaring open season on many of the party's sacred cows (Glasman, 2010; Glasman et al., 2011; Davis, 2011). Its style was avowedly controversial; it was a good way to gain attention for new ideas, but not a good way to ensure that they were taken seriously by the sceptical and unaligned. By 2011 many felt that the wheels had come off the Glasman wagon (Davis, 2012). But Blue Labour's core propositions have not gone away; rather, over the past year they have fed into the debate about how the party might put flesh on Ed Miliband's proclamation of a new politics of 'One Nation Labour' (Cruddas, 2013).

In this essay I particularly want to look at how advocates of this new thinking have drawn lessons from the party's history to legitimate their arguments about current politics. I also want to make a few suggestions of my own about how the party should view its past moments of success and failure, and what lessons, if any, they may hold for 2015. But first, in the spirit of the situational politics advocated by civil society pressure groups such as Citizens UK, I should probably place myself clearly within my own politics. As a professional historian I have written extensively on British popular politics, and especially on the historic difficulties Labour faced constructing a stable, broad-based politics in the first half of the twentieth century (Lawrence, 1998, 2011a). But that's not why I agreed to write this piece. That has much more to do with my thirty year membership of the party and my own family background, which, as the son of working-class Tory parents from East Bristol who both grew up in staunch Labour households, is almost a parody of the Blue Labour analysis of the party's problem.

History matters to the proponents of 'Blue Labour' because at the heart of its politics lies a foundation myth: that Labour was born out of mutualist organisations developed by working people to tame capitalism in the nineteenth century, but lost its

way in the 1940s when its leaders were seduced by the centralising and statist imperatives of power. Maurice Glasman set this this out most clearly in his 2010 essay 'Labour as a radical tradition'. It was here that he controversially argued that 'the victory of 1945 ... was the trigger for its [Labour's] long-term decline', thereby distancing himself from one of the triumphant moments of Labour's past that even Tony Blair found useable from time to time (Glasman, 2010; Blair, 1995). Glasman also played down the role of liberalism in the formation of Labour politics. In his analysis the party was hijacked by 'political liberalism' when middle-class intellectuals took over the show (Glasman, 2011; for a riposte see Jackson, 2011). Participants in the recent debates about One Nation Labour have generally sought to rehabilitate 1945 as the embodiment of Labour as an inclusive, 'national' party committed to social justice, but the place of liberal pluralism remains contested (Cruddas, 2013; Miliband, 2013).

### Blue Labour history

There is a long tradition of Labour politicians reworking the party's history and traditions to serve present politics – we all need myths to live by, and politicians more than most need useable pasts (Samuel and Thompson, 1990; Lawrence, 2000). It would therefore be pointless to dwell on whether Glasman offers us good or bad history as history, since its purpose is myth-making for the present, but we do need to ask: where does Blue Labour's version of Labour history serve bad politics in the present?

Firstly, Glasman is clearly right that some predominantly (though not exclusively) working-class mutualist organisations such as trade unions and co-operative societies played a key role in early Labour politics, helping to shape Labour's sense of itself as a *movement* with deep local roots in specific communities. However, many other mutualist organisations kept Labour at arms' length – notably the massive friendly society movement, most working men's clubs, and most local churches and chapels. Moreover, Labour's mutualist bodies were not, for the most part, anti-statist or anti-welfare – on the contrary, from the first years of the party's existence they tended to argue that the state must step in to help those too weak or too poor to help themselves through voluntary association in trades unions and cooperatives. They recognised the limits of the associational principle (Thane, 1985). From the start so-called general unions, those organising the less highly skilled, saw the state as a potential ally in their unequal battle to raise wage levels and improve job security. By 1912 even the powerful miners' federation was working closely with the state to establish minimum wages and maximum hours for men at the coalface. Only the long established skilled unions tended to be wary, and these, contrary to Glasman's thesis, remained bastions of radical liberalism, even if they were no longer formally Liberal (Reid, 2004).

Moreover, trade union mutualism was necessarily built on strict discipline, sometimes tempered by traditions of internal democracy, sometimes not. This authoritarianism was essential if workers were to wield sufficient collective power to raise the value of their labour in the market, but it was also in keeping with an age in which social life remained deeply corporate and paternalist, even if individualism was allowed to reign in economic affairs. Trade unions developed their own 'counter-paternalism' as a mirror of Britain's deeply hierarchical, class-bound society. Glasman

suggests that Labour's turn to statism after 1945 eroded this mutualist culture, leaving only selfish, economic militancy, but it seems more plausible to argue that broader social and cultural changes associated with the collapse of paternalist authority in Britain from the late 1950s also undermined the 'counter-paternalism' of Britain's trade union leaders (Goldthorpe, 1978; Lawrence, 2011b).

### The vision thing

But I am saying more than just that one could not restore the solidaristic, self-denying mutualist culture of early twentieth-century trade unionism even if one wanted to (and even if British employers would allow it to happen). I am saying that a revolution in attitudes to selfhood and personal autonomy since the 1950s means that one cannot hope to resurrect a broad-based politics rooted in supposedly normative moral values, and that worse, the scope for constructing new mutualist alliances in civil society may be more limited than advocates of both the Blue Labour and One Nation projects allow. Yes, they will work in particular places, built around particular causes, and they can help restore a sense of Labour being a 'movement' rather than just an electoral machine, but one must have very grave doubts about the scope for turning such groupings into a coherent *national* movement.

One reason for this is that, despite Glasman's tendency to laud the early Labour Party's superiority over the post-1945 party, this strategy of building a movement up from the grassroots didn't work even in its heyday. The 'politics of place' helped Labour to get established, but they didn't provide it with a route map to Downing Street (Tanner, 1990; Lawrence 1998, 2011a). Between 1900 and 1945 Labour never secured more than 38 per cent of the popular vote, although approximately three-quarters of the population were manual workers and their dependants. Intriguingly, one of the most plausible explanations for this failure, as Martin Pugh has argued, was that in this period the Labour Party struggled to come to terms with the deeply ingrained conservative, even 'Tory' instincts of large swathes of the British working class, especially in the South, the West Midlands and Lancashire (Pugh, 2002). This, he argues, was because the party was heavily stamped by the traditions of nonconformity and radical liberalism that ran deep in nineteenth-century trade unionism, making it appear to be puritanical and un-patriotic to many instinctively conservative workers, especially in predominantly Anglican regions of England. By this reading Labour *became* 'Blue' as it rose to the challenges of the Second World War; it certainly became more unambiguously a *national* party able to break out of its localised heartlands to capture suburban and rural seats that had shown little interest in the party between the wars.

And here, it seems to me, is the real problem for the Blue Labour version of the party's history. Even during the heyday of British mutualism, when the party had deep roots in mass movements such as trade unionism and co-operation, it proved quite incapable of replicating the model that gave it near hegemonic power in some districts in other constituencies that, though perhaps more heterogeneous, were nonetheless far from privileged. In an age already coming to be dominated by national communication media such as the popular press, radio and cinema there was no local, bottom-up route to government (Beers, 2010). On the contrary, Labour won its first national majority by

constructing a broad national appeal based on two elements: a powerful vision of renewal rooted in the myths of the ‘People’s War’, and a strong narrative about the recent past, which stressed the ‘betrayal’ of ex-servicemen after 1918, and the Conservatives’ responsibility for the misery of mass unemployment in the 1930s. In the process it was able to overturn the dominant National Government narrative of the 1930s, which had portrayed Labour ministers as stooges of the TUC who had run away from office in the crisis of 1931 rather than upset their paymasters (McKibbin, 2010). Mutualism gave Labour its sense of itself as a movement, but alone it could only have sustained it as a powerful voice of opposition, powerless to do much to change the basic structures of the economy or public policy.

There are of course other problems with adopting a dichotomous model of ‘mutualist’ and ‘statist’ strategies. Not only were most British trade unions quite open to state action, but during the 1930s their leaders played a key role in developing many of the policies that would be enacted by the Attlee governments of 1945-51. They were not stolid figures outmanoeuvred by a new generation of upper-middle-class socialist intellectuals. Moreover, in the 1940s both trade union leaders and Labour politicians remained committed to trying to preserve the space for flourishing traditions of mutualism and voluntarism within their planned system of more comprehensive welfare and public services. They were determined that state welfare would not blot out the civic impulses which they, like the advocates of Blue Labour and One Nation Labour, believed to be central to a healthy, good society (Finlayson, 1994). They also tried hard to ensure that planned new towns and municipal estates would become vibrant cross-class communities, encouraging mixed housing designs and the generous provision of public space and civic amenities (Francis, 1997, 122-30). However, by the 1950s research was already pointing to the inherent difficulties of trying to engineer communalism and new forms of civic mutualism. Not only did mixed development not, apparently, lead to social mixing, but community groups often proved to be sources of social antagonism rather than social harmony. Researchers found widespread suspicion of cliques and exclusivity, but more troubling for any mutualist project, they also found that a large proportion of residents simply opted out of communal life altogether – preferring a private, family-centred sociability (Kuper, 1953; Mitchell and Lupton, 1954; Chapman, 1955). There is no reason to imagine that we have suddenly become more gregarious and likely to prove responsive to engineered sociability in the intervening decades; quite the reverse.

Labour’s post-war attempts to engineer mutualism into their New Jerusalem died, not from the neglect of statist ministers, but from British workers’ strong preference for a privatised, family-centred individualism. If we don’t learn from this lesson we really will fall into a massive political trap. Yes, one lesson is that the state will struggle to engineer a more mutualist society, but another is that mutualism itself will not easily reach large swathes of British people. The advocates of One Nation Labour tend to be more comfortable with the state playing an enabling role in encouraging the spread of local mutualist organisations, hence their emphasis on the need to develop a more ‘relational state’, or in Marc Stears’ preferred formulation ‘a state that supports relationships’ (Cooke and Muir, 2012), but they too would do well to dwell on the disappointing outcomes of these earlier attempts to embed an active associational culture within civil

society. Stears' approach probably offers the most hope. Like Paul Hirst in the 1990s, he draws inspiration from early British advocates of associational pluralism such as Cole and Laski, adapting their values to a world in which ideas of individuality and choice have become central to our understanding of citizenship and the self (Stears, 2002, 2011; Hirst, 1994; Hirst and Khilnani, 1996). Such an approach is also more compatible with liberal traditions that have very deep roots in British culture. And it takes a more realistic view of the basic intractability of everyday life; it is easy to forget that the urge to secure the privacy of family life and the autonomy of the home have very deep historical roots (Cohen, 2013). True, one should not assume a rigid dichotomy between individualism and collectivism, or between privatised and communal lifestyles – people can, and do, operate in different modes at different times depending on the context – but it is not without reason that clichés like 'the Englishman's home is his castle' and 'we keep ourselves to ourselves' have been embedded deep in popular culture (and psychology) for generations.

### **Rediscovering an inclusive social language**

Finally, I want to say a few things about perhaps the biggest failure of New Labour in power, and why I fear that the new politics generated by Blue Labour and its allies may perpetuate rather than overcome these problems. I am referring to New Labour's failure to articulate a coherent and powerful alternative social vision to that fostered by Thatcherite policy and rhetoric after 1979. Arguably, what made the governments of 1945-51 and 1979-92 transformative was that they did more than simply seize upon shifts in public attitudes, which are always in truth much more inchoate and malleable than pollsters' findings would lead one to believe (too few politicians seem to take seriously the extent to which polling, and even focus groups, *manufacture* opinions as much as they capture them). Both the Attlee and Thatcher governments also used a combination of public policy and political rhetoric to remake the public's 'common sense' about politics. New Labour spectacularly failed to do this – it didn't even try. Instead it sought to use the levers of public policy alone, and as much as possible it sought to hide its achievements behind a smoke-screen of rhetoric about aspiration and markets that chimed with swing voters' perceived priorities and prejudices. The problem was not so much New Labour's statism, as its 'stupid statism'. It is quite easy to construct a case that New Labour was much more socially progressive than its courting of Middle England might suggest, but it did precious little to try and reshape the prejudices and preconceptions of Galaxy Man or Worcester Woman. Since the 1980s, academics like Stuart Hall and Gareth Stedman Jones had been stressing the power of political language to remake popular understanding of 'the social' (i.e. everyday life), but for New Labour both interests and attitudes were essentially fixed; it was politics that had to bend (Hall, 1988; Stedman Jones, 1983).

Now I accept that perhaps the defining feature of both Blue Labour and One Nation Labour is the ambition to sketch a coherent alternative vision to the politics of both the present Coalition and New Labour in the Blair/Brown years. One hallmark of this emerging vision is a rejection of both reflex statism and doctrinaire neo-liberalism, and the projection of a radical, communitarian alternative based around the idea that indi-

vidual well-being can best be delivered through a stronger shared commitment to the pursuit of the common good. But at present this new politics reproduces some of New Labour's weaknesses, particularly the obsession with following, rather than leading public opinion (some of Glasman's headline-grabbing comments from 2011 spring to mind). In opposition a political party controls little beyond the ephemeral politics of representation, but it can nonetheless use these to shape people's understanding of the world as it is and the world as it might be – to start to change the common sense of politics. For sure, this will only work if a party can pick up on important trends in our fluid, diverse post-modern culture and use these to weave a new politics that captures the *Zeitgeist* – the power of language to redefine political realities is not infinite, but it is considerable.

We can learn much by contrasting the New Labour politics of the 1990s with how Labour responded to the challenge prior to its two previous landslide victories (1945 and 1966). In 1945 Labour built on radically populist wartime propaganda about a 'people's war' to construct a political appeal which was explicitly inclusive and national, yet placed the eradication of poverty and its evils centre stage. Labour stressed 'security' rather than 'welfare' when they spoke about social reform, and placed great emphasis on the importance of universal rather than means-tested benefits and services (Baldwin, 1990; Lawrence, 2011a). They spoke of the eradication of poverty as a patriotic duty, but they also knew that they had to make this part of a broader strategy to eradicate the uncertainty and insecurity that hung over the lives of most Britons. By the 1960s rising living standards, two decades of full employment, and three successive election defeats suggested that Labour's appeal needed recalibrating. Labour politicians still played up memories of the hungry thirties, but at the heart of Harold Wilson's appeal was a critique of Britain's privileged, class-bound establishment which was accused of presiding over 'thirteen wasted years' in which the country had stagnated in comparison to its principal competitors. Scientists, managers and workers were all said to have been held back by a complacent, socially exclusive elite which understood nothing of ordinary peoples' lives (Fielding, 2007). Crucially, in both cases Labour politicians constructed a broad, inclusive politics which explicitly sought to marry the needs of the poor and the aspirations of the more fortunate within a single vision. By contrast, in the 1990s New Labour chose to disguise its continued concern for the poor and disadvantaged beneath a shiny new rhetoric which effectively pitched 'hard-working families' in opposition to welfare 'dependants'. Electorally it worked, but it left Labour's serious efforts to combat poverty, such as Sure Start, family tax credits, and the education maintenance allowance, more vulnerable politically, once Labour was out of office, than the reforms passed by either Attlee or Wilson.

But Labour must not assume that re-establishing an inclusive social language means ditching liberalism as though it were merely one more aberration of New Labour's focus on Middle England. The debates thrown up in response to Blue Labour too often appear deaf to the strength of what Mike Savage has termed the 'rugged individualism' at the heart of British popular culture (as it happens he was particularly talking about the culture of post-war shop-floor workers, but the impulse runs much deeper than that: Savage, 1999). In its original form Blue Labour was also insufficiently attentive to the key role that the state must play in enabling more communal, grass-roots democratic practices (the One Nation debate since 2012 has not reproduced this

weakness). But, above all, Glasman's original intervention was blind to the labour movement's deep historic commitment to *liberal* as well as mutualist values and practices. If the advocates of a new, more communalist Labour politics cannot come to terms with that powerful liberal tradition, and with the abstract ideals that it enshrined – not just about rights but about 'fairness', 'freedom' and 'justice' – then it won't just be historically misconceived, it will also be historically doomed.

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