

EDITORIAL

Labour's ideology: towards common ground

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Intellectual divisions on the left may be more apparent than real.

Noisiness in political debate can be a virtue and a vice. Jeremy Corbyn's incredible victory in the Labour leadership contest is testament to this: from one point of view he has shown the sheer mobilising power of a clear, polemical ideological vision, even when articulated in an unassuming, modest style. The electoral failure of the main body of the Parliamentary Labour Party was in large measure a failure to counter Corbyn's appeal with an equivalently bold and non-technocratic set of political arguments capable of energising Labour members and supporters. But such intoxicating visions can also mislead, and drag parties and movements into fruitlessly relearning lessons that ought to have been internalised long ago. This at any rate has been the main concern voiced by Corbyn's opponents in the debate over Labour's current electoral strategy and tactics; but a parallel argument can be mounted in relation to the debate over Labour's ideological orientation, a topic that deserves greater attention than it has so far received in the wake of the 2015 general election.

Old, New, Blue

There is a probably inevitable sectarian impulse that animates intellectuals, activists and politicians when they set out their visions for Labour's future direction. In order

to be heard amid the cacophony of the online public sphere, they pitch their ideas as offering a fundamental break from recent Labour thinking, and devote considerable rhetorical ingenuity to demarcating their offering from earlier, inferior products in the marketplace of ideas. Such was the style of New Labour in its heyday, of Blue Labour after 2010, and such is the emergent tone of the Corbyn ascendancy.

The Scottish referendum and its aftermath vividly demonstrated the dangers of the prefix ‘New’ in ‘New Labour’. The self-conscious styling of Labour as breaking from certain of its traditions made it possible for Scottish nationalists and the non-Labour left to pillory Labour for purportedly betraying its social base, becoming unmoored from its historical roots, and, for want of a better phrase, tarnishing its brand in government after 1997. The discourse of Corbynism has largely followed this sweeping account of Labour’s trajectory since 1997 (or 1994), even if in practice, as Owen Jones observed, the Corbyn campaign and then leadership has achieved significant political traction from a staunch defence of New Labour’s redistributive achievements on welfare benefits and tax credits (Jones, 2015). A more sophisticated, but historically speaking much more radical, version of this form of argument also characterised the prominent Blue Labour texts, which sought to cleanse the Labour tradition of the impurities introduced by progressive liberalism; ‘statist’ social democracy such as Croslandite revisionism; and New Labour modernism. The authentic Labour tradition, on this view, is one that claims back its mutualist and co-operative roots.

While this polarising style of disputation fosters a lively critical debate, something is lost in the process – not least some recognition of the insights that can be gleaned from different ideological perspectives. Instead, it is surely worth asking whether a more synthetic approach might help us to forge some common ground between the various strands of Labour ideology.

In fairness, it should be acknowledged that, in spite of the strict rhetorical battle-lines laid down by some of the protagonists, one valuable synthetic approach did emerge from the Blue Labour debate: an attempt to bring together New Labour – or, perhaps, a Blairite version of New Labour – with Blue Labour, an effort that may have reflected the political predispositions of many of the key political figures involved in its genesis (David Miliband, James Purnell, Tessa Jowell).

This approach has been most clearly articulated by Duncan O’Leary, who has argued that Labour’s future now lies in knitting together what we might call the ‘state-sceptical’ strands of Blue and New Labour. As O’Leary put it: ‘both reject the idea that the

state knows people's own interests better than they do' and both thus mandate policies oriented towards empowering the users of public services, such as school choice, localism, personal budgets for social care, and a more participatory model of governance for services more generally. O'Leary added that a shared emphasis on personal responsibility leads both tendencies to converge on a model of the welfare state that emphasises reciprocity and contribution, as well as an interest in fostering asset-based welfare models. Further areas of common ground, O'Leary argued, include fiscal conservatism, coupled with investment in infrastructure and education to drive growth, and perhaps even reforms to corporate governance along the lines of German social market capitalism (O'Leary, 2015; for another attempt to bring together New and Blue in relation to public services, see Cooke and Muir, 2012).

Such a confluence between Blue Labour and New Labour might seem appropriate, since some of the most widely discussed Blue Labour interventions included a rebarbative critique of many other staples of Labour intellectual debates, with liberals and Croslandites coming in for some particularly heavy fire. Yet I want to suggest that these polemical excesses actually misrepresent the best fit between the Blue Labour agenda and its precursors. O'Leary's attempted blend of New and Blue is too one-sided in its focus on reforming the state at the expense of a critical approach to the inequalities and lack of freedom generated by neo-liberal capitalism. Instead, I will delineate an alternative intellectual agenda that brings together the apparently antagonistic positions of social democratic revisionism, progressive liberalism, and Blue Labour to offer a profitable common ground on which Labour's future ideological direction might be constructed.

Where is the new common ground?

There are three specific areas where the different strands of Labour thinking can be knitted into an intellectual framework that goes beyond the parameters of New Labour. First, one of the great weaknesses of New Labour was that it was famously – at times comically – evasive about whether the reduction of economic inequality constituted an important goal of public policy. The spectacle of a Labour Prime Minister refusing to say that he cared about income inequality remains a memorable vignette of the New Labour years. But the political climate has significantly shifted on this issue, with technocratic bodies such as the OECD and the IMF joining with authoritative authors such as Thomas Piketty (2014) or Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009) in forging a powerful case for a more egalitarian distribution of

income and wealth. A new elite consensus has emerged on the centre-left (and perhaps even right) that current levels of inequality are unsustainable not only because they undermine social cohesion and equal opportunity, but also because they siphon the benefits of economic growth to a small minority at the top at the expense of the living standards of the broad majority (for a striking recent example of this shift in elite opinion, see Byrne, 2015). This distributional agenda is in effect a modernisation of the egalitarian goals elaborated by earlier post-war Labour thinkers such as Crosland. But Blue Labour thinkers also seek a more equal distribution of economic goods, even if some of them view the language of equality as too abstract; hence the great importance they attach to 'the living wage'. Rather, the distinctive Blue Labour approach to these issues is said to be support for institutions likely to shape more egalitarian market incomes, rather than depending as much on the politics of redistribution purportedly favoured by Croslandites. But even here the distinction is not as sharp as many of its advocates believe. The vision outlined by Crosland in *The Future of Socialism* (1956) presupposed not only the Beveridgean welfare state, but also the post-1945 set of labour market institutions (notably an unprecedentedly high level of collective bargaining) and economic regulations that shaped a highly 'predistributive' British economy. And the agenda for the future proposed by Crosland and his allies revolved not only around a well-funded welfare state but also encompassed measures to tackle wealth inequality and disperse property-ownership more widely (Jackson, 2005). Faced with the post-Thatcher British economy, with its deregulated and casualised labour market, a revised Croslandism should be just as concerned with predistribution as redistribution.

There is, however, another component to the Blue Labour critique of Croslandite revisionism that has greater force. This argument, pressed also in earlier years by liberal and republican critics such as David Marquand (and before that by the New Left), is that the revisionist focus on socio-economic inequality is too single-minded, since it has little to say about the fundamental inequalities of power that characterise British state and society. This raises a second theme around which a new Labour synthesis could be reached, drawing on the critical perspectives of liberalism, republicanism, and Blue Labour's revival of a more participatory socialism. A concerted attempt to disperse the concentrations of power commanded by the British political and economic elite could complement, rather than displace, a neo-revisionist egalitarianism that likewise sought to diffuse income and wealth more widely. Similarly, for all Blue Labour's insistence that liberalism was Labour's enemy not its ally – an individualistic creed that dragged Labour away from its roots in collective action – an emphasis on a mutualist, localised politics actually fits quite

well with the traditions of the Liberal Party. The Blue Labour prospectus in fact bears a striking resemblance to the preoccupations of post-war British Liberalism: attention to civil society activism; to greater opportunities for democratic participation in industry, government, and in the delivery of public services; and to measures to tackle concentrations of power in both the economy and the state. It is an agenda that perhaps owes more to Jo Grimond than Roy Jenkins, but it could nonetheless form common ground some Liberal Democrats and Labour.

Such an agenda would, of course, encompass reform of the constitution, with a legitimate second chamber and electoral reform as important concerns, alongside further attention to decentralising and perhaps even federalising the British state. The decaying condition of the Anglo-Scottish union – and the need to meet the nationalist challenge by projecting a more democratic and modern vision of Britain – lends these issues a political urgency they previously lacked. But a concern with the distribution of power should not be confined to the constitution. It must also scrutinise the organisation of public services to find new ways of empowering service users and workers. However, the important difference between this approach and the alternative hybrid of New and Blue mooted earlier is that it seeks to create not just opportunities for the exercise of individual choice but also new scope for collective choice and deliberation through the use of democratic mechanisms. Furthermore, such innovations should not be limited to the public sector – serious discussion of employee voice in corporate governance and the workplace more generally will be vital to any political project that is genuine about the diffusion of power.

A third area where a more productive synthesis could be reached concerns the relationship between a politics focused on winning power over the state and a politics of mutualism and civic mobilisation. As many of the Blue Labour, liberal and Corbynite critics of New Labour have argued, there is a lot to be said for a renewed emphasis on the British left on a localised, mutualist politics that draws on civic energy and participation to mount the campaigns that drive social change; develop new sites of co-operative organisation; and build a labour movement that is more organically connected to the community (Stears, 2011). In the quest for power at the centre, this dimension of left politics was allowed to wither in the New Labour years. Yet such mobilisation across civil society is critical to building a broad-based, deeply rooted social movement that does not rely solely on the good offices of a parliamentary cadre untethered from its base. But it's not enough on its own, as some of its advocates seem to believe. Modern electoral competition, and the

capacity to make large-scale reforms that can change the whole country for the better, inescapably revolves around the control of complex bureaucratic organisations and the technocratic demands of constructing effective policies for them. Electoral success further rests on winning over some voters who will be on the whole disinclined to engage with movement politics. These points are no more than truisms, but they have been obscured in recent Labour debates as the zeal to return to a more authentic style of Labour politics has crowded out the more mundane electoral realities that will always confront the Labour Party if it wants to form a government. We should avoid setting up a false dichotomy between the politics of the state and the politics of the movement: both are needed if Labour is to renew itself and ultimately practice a brand of politics that is both credible and authentic.

Moulded in the right way, these intellectual currents could form a vibrant Labour vision, one that progresses beyond some of the apparent ideological divisions of recent years. Important tensions and differences will still remain, of course, but a broad direction of travel can be agreed. The difficulty is that ideas are only one of the ingredients needed for a concerted Labour revival. Also required are a prime ministerial leader, a credible economic strategy, and disciplined communications and messaging. At present, these other ingredients are absent, and Labour is therefore unlikely to be in a position to realise any of these ideas for some time to come.

Ben Jackson is the Editor of *Renewal*. This is his final issue as Editor.

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