The Blair Supremacy: A study in the politics of Labour's party management

Lewis Minkin

Reviewed by Eric Shaw

Lewis Minkin's research into New Labour's party management offers indispensable lessons for those concerned with the party's current managerial problems, showing the limits to the 'Blair supremacy' and its long-term effects in alienating some party members. A managerial philosophy and strategy which places less emphasis on obedience to the majority will and more on consultation, minority rights and the patient resolution of differences is the route to reuniting the party now.

This book consolidates Lewis Minkin's reputation as the Labour party's most accomplished scholar. It is indispensable reading for all – including MPs, political advisers and journalists – with an interest in how the party works. Drawing upon a huge number of interviews as well as his own experience observing and advising the party, Minkin analyses the sources, nature, limits and consequences of Blairite party management, or what he calls 'the Blair supremacy'. This is a huge work (800 pages) so in this article I will concentrate on two broad areas: Minkin's core arguments and the light his work casts on the party's current managerial problems.

Minkin locates the origins of Blairite managerial thinking in the formative historical experience of its central protagonists, the internal strife that tore the party apart in the early 1980s. Blair, Brown and their allies were resolved to end what they saw as the party's 'dangerous proclivity to public exhibitions of internal conflict' (p.131). Obsessed by what they saw as the party's 'lurch into extremism' 'New Labour' was driven, Minkin cites one minister as saying, by 'an icy determination that it was not going to happen again' (p.130). Hence the core New Labour principle of party management: an electable party was one that was tightly managed and regulated.

But in whose interest? Minkin's central proposition is that Blair's transformation of

Labour was based not on consent, that is the willing endorsement of the New Labour 'Project' but on a mixture of command and control and manipulative politics. Early in the Blair years, and with great fanfare, the report *Partnership in Power* had announced a radically new approach to framing policy. In place of the traditional adversarial and centralised style of policy-making *Partnership in Power* introduced new institutions such as the National Policy Forum, animated by the principles of inclusivity, dialogue and partnership.

But hopes were soon dashed. Minkin shows, with a compelling wealth of evidence, how much of this new structure amounted to little more than a dignified façade masking a 'covert managerial coup' designed to fasten the leaders' grasp over all key institutions (p.700). The outcome was an 'unprecedented build-up of the role of Leader' (p.136), a new form of 'managed democracy' which was used to drive through the New Labour agenda. Minkin's scrupulous investigations demonstrate that that none of New Labour most contentious policies – NHS marketisation, the Private Finance Initiative, 'light-touch' regulation of the labour and financial markets, and, of course, Iraq – either had emanated from or were endorsed by the new institutions set up by *Partnership in Power.* In effect, the complex architecture of the new policy regime operated as a mechanism to confer legitimacy upon a policy revolution which lacked (within Labour's ranks) a popular mandate. Indeed, the Blair and Brown years witnessed the disempowerment and marginalisation through a plethora of techniques – stage management, agenda-setting, orchestration of proceedings, arms-twisting etc. – of key party institutions, notably Conference and the NEC.

Amongst the most fascinating and illuminating aspects of the book are Minkin's dissection of the Blair-inspired reshaping of party culture. Minkin here identifies three key precepts in the Blairite ethos which were systematically applied to managing the party: the 'delivery ethic', unswerving loyalty to the leader and a vanguard conception of politics.

> *1. The 'delivery ethic'.* Blair regarded traditional party culture – with its respect for rules, procedures and traditional practices – as cumbersome, time-consuming and inhibiting. Modern campaigning now demanded speedy responses, quick-thinking and dexterity. This meant (in the New Labour view) dispensing with sluggish customary ways of doing things in favour of a 'can-do' mentality and an ethic of delivery. If established rules and conventions inhibited 'getting the right results' they should be fudged, ignored or even abrogated. In the much used slogan, 'what mattered is what works' and that meant getting 'a good result' for Tony. This pragmatism was underpinned by what Minkin describes as the Blairite concept of 'serious politics', which he defines as a 'covert code of behaviour' constituted by the willingness to use Machiavellian methods – whatever 'what we can get away with' – in order to 'deliver for Tony' (pp.137, p.665).

2. Loyalty to the leader. In the Blair (and Brown) years a new cadre of party officials and political advisors emerged owing allegiance not to the party but to the leader. Minkin charts how the role conceptions of such staffers ceased to be that of 'party civil servants', with an obligation to act in a (reasonably) impartial manner. Instead their duty was to the leader (or, the case of those who worked for Gordon Brown, the faction chief). Younger people recruited to fill staffing roles, not conversant with Labour's traditional culture, were inculcated into this new mind-set. Many of these staffers were to continue as advisers, officials or as MPs under Miliband and to whom they showed, at best, tepid loyalty.

3. Vanguard politics. Far from being the pure opportunists often depicted, New Labourites saw themselves as people with a mission, 'culture carriers' of modernisation' – though what 'modernisation' actually meant could be elusive. Most New Labourites recognised that (as one senior party staffer told this writer) 'true believers' formed only a minority, perhaps a modest one, of party members. But this acted to reinforce their *elan* of being a cadre of the committed to serving, as Minkin puts it, 'a special historical purpose.' This in turn imparted 'a militant sense of moral justification' so they could conceive themselves as representing the future, whilst deriding any opposition as backward-looking, tawdry and historically obsolete (p665).

The key features of Blair's managerial rule, Minkin concludes, were 'skillful, audacious leadership', a strengthened managerial machine and a willingness to skirt around the rules, all of which combined into a tenacious and sophisticated managerial regime (p.699). But it was by no means entirely successful. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was a constant tendency to over-extend and a willful reluctance to listen to advice – exemplified most starkly by the foiled efforts to block the election of Ken Livingstone as London mayor and Rhodri Morgan as Welsh First Minister. Secondly, many of the features of Blairite management – disciplined communication, cohesive messages, well-co-ordinated political interventions and adept political manoeuvring – were highly functional in the short-term. But, often taken too far, they gradually morphed, both within and without the party, into popular perceptions of 'spin' and 'control freakery'.

Repeated exposure to the 'dark arts' (p.515) had an alienating effect on Labour party members, many of whom quit the party (but were to return in 2015). The belief that the ends justified the means, that respect for rules and norms could be airily dismissed as 'processology' and that those who had the temerity to disagree with New Labour 'modernisation' were simply outdated 'Old Labour' relics of the past all sowed a growing mood of exasperation, mistrust and indignation.

Here is the linkage between 'the Blair Supremacy' and the astonishing triumph of Jeremy Corbyn. Although much more research is required into why Corbyn won, one important consideration appears to have been a backlash against Blairism: not only its policies but also its style, its *modus operandi:* its 'serious politics', its 'vanguardism' and its obsessive determination to 'deliver for Tony'. Against the smooth, slick and well-spun Blairite politician Corbyn could boast his 'authenticity', that he was uncontaminated by the New Labour regime and had proven his immunity to the lure of pelf, power and privilege.

Under the new leadership, party management is as important as it has ever been. Poachers have – as unexpectedly to themselves as to anyone else – turned gamekeepers. Congenital rebels from the radical left now find themselves occupying senior managerial positions, for which many have neither the experience, the qualities nor, perhaps, the aptitude. Yet the scale of the managerial problems confronting Corbyn are unprecedented. Never before has the leadership been occupied by a representative of the radical left, with a strong base in the constituencies but with minimal support amongst Labour MPs.

In light of the current leadership contest, the managerial priorities for Corbyn, or for a new Labour leader, after the announcement of the results of the election on 24 September will be: to assert his or her authority, prevent opponents in the PLP destabilising his or her leadership, ensure compliance with his or her decisions and rebuild some measure of unity. How can the leadership achieve this?

If Corbyn retains his hold on the Labour leadership, he will have two managerial options. The first, which we can call the *majoritarian centralist*, holds that as victor in a democratic leadership contest, Corbyn has been entrusted with a mandate to implement the platform upon which he fought the election. This both confers upon him the right to rule whilst placing upon the minority the obligation to respect the majority will. In this sense the doctrine is majoritarian. It is also centralist in that it legitimates the full exercise of leadership powers to ensure that the voice of the majority, as detailed in the leader's platform, prevails, whatever the resistance of others. This is the option advocated by those of his supporters who see a unique opportunity to both transform the way the party operates (towards some form of grassroots democracy) and radicalise its policies and ideology.

The alternative managerial strategy can be called the pluralist. This was first promulgated half a century ago by the political theorist and Labour minister, Richard Crossman. Criticising what he called Labour's version of 'democratic centralism' he advocated a managerial philosophy which placed less emphasis on obedience to the majority will and more on consultation, minority rights and the patient resolution of

differences.[1] This qualifies the pursuit of majoritarianism by an accent on sustaining party unity through mutual accommodation and consensus-building. This course has been urged by those of Corbyn's backers for whom party unity is a managerial priority and who see the new leadership's survival and success as contingent on a broader political base.

In the first eight months of the leadership, Corbyn has oscillated uneasily between the two strategies. One the one hand, heavy-handed means, such as frontbench sackings and the mobilisation of extra-parliamentary pressure (through the pro-Corbyn *Momentum* organisation) have clearly been used as ways of corralling parliamentary critics into line. But such methods have proved ineffective (e.g. Corbyn backed down over both the Syria vote and his cabinet reshuffle), not surprisingly since a Blair-style tight managerial regime requires an agglomeration of power at the centre, which Corbyn lacks. Equally, he cannot be unaware that his long record as a serial rebel deprives him of any moral authority if he sought to sanction those who, like him, regularly defy authority.

On the other hand, Corbyn's own language and personal style has been emollient and conciliatory and in a number of policy areas (though not all) efforts have been made to broker compromises. The problem here has been twofold: firstly, this approach has not been consistently followed. For example, a number of hard-liners have been appointed to key positions and not all pronouncements have been mollifying. The second problem is a disinclination of Corbyn's most vocal critics – the Blairites – to engage in constructive involvement. As the influential Oxford Economics professor, Simon Wren-Lewis, observed many of these critics have 'convinced themselves so strongly that [Corbyn] would be a calamity if elected that they have continued the campaign long after the result was announced'. And some have even concluded that he would be 'such a disaster that it is best to sabotage Labour at every turn so that his electoral defeat is emphatic and certain'.[2] The Blairite sense that they have an entitlement to rule, so well charted by Minkin, has not deserted them.

If the leader after 24 September is *not* Corbyn, he or she will have broadly the same two leadership strategies open to him or her, though he or she may well face significant opposition from the left of the party.

Events have validated Minkin's thesis that, formidable though its reach was, the Blair supremacy was ultimately based on rather shaky foundations. But equally he was correct to argue that the ability of a leader to manage the party effectively is vital if Labour is to prosper (p708). Party management strategies can, however, differ considerably. In the place of the top-down, manipulative approach favored by New

Labour Minkin urged one based on trust, persuasion and consensus-building. As an inveterate rebel, Corbyn understands the limits of imposition and discipline but has yet to demonstrate the capacity to formulate and implement an alternative.

Eric Shaw is Honorary Research Fellow, Division of History and Politics, University of Stirling.

Notes

1   Eric Shaw *Discipline and Discord in the Labour Party*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 1988, pp159-161.
2   Simon Wren-Lewis, 23.2.16, https://mainlymacro.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/sanders-versus-clinton-lessons-from-uk.html.