Plain Old Labour

Nick Garland

Keir Starmer's Labour has a strikingly simple perspective on the party's history: of a series of good Labour governments affecting progressive change on behalf of 'working people'. This might seem a rather prosaic observation, but it marks a striking departure from the more radically revisionist intellectual efforts of the Blair or Miliband era. Perhaps, however, 'Plain Old Labour' is not such a bad thing in a moment when social-democratic instinct may be a better guide to a turbulent world than sweeping vision.

Academics seeking to get a grip on a political project like texts. They like politicians to pen pamphlets, deliver lectures and speeches, providing rich material to understand their ideological orientation. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown frequently obliged. Ed Miliband surrounded himself with sometime academics, authors of various idiosyncratic readings of modern political history and culture. Keir Starmer is rather less forthcoming, and among the sort of people who like to write for *Renewal*, the frustration has occasionally been palpable.

During the general election campaign, Labour put out a video on its twitter/x account. 'This is the power of a Labour government', it declared, over a video running through the party's past achievements.[1] Landmarks of the 1924, 1945-51, 1964-79 and 1997-2010 governments were celebrated, culminating in the video of Gordon Brown's much celebrated 2009 conference speech in which he extolled, at length, the difference made by that most recent Labour government. This, you might reasonably conclude, was nothing if not conventional.

There were, nevertheless, a few striking things about the video. There was a rare, celebratory reference to the first Ramsay MacDonald government, formed exactly a century earlier (though not the second, treacherous one), with a particular emphasis on the Wheatley Housing Act, which provided for Treasury subsidy of council housebuilding. The Attlee government was celebrated for raising the school leaving age, the New Towns Act, the National Insurance Act and the NHS. The Wilson-Callaghan governments were commended for their famous liberal reforms, for the Equal Pay Act, and for the establishment of the Open University. And New Labour for pretty much everything that Brown's speechwriter could think of in autumn 2009. Many of these emphases, of course, mapped onto manifesto priorities: to 'get Britain building again', 'break the class ceiling', or 'get the NHS back on its feet'.

'So what?', you might reasonably say, about a video which will, at most, have had the input of one or two senior figures in the government, and almost certainly didn't change a single voters' mind. However, it was a surprisingly rich text which captured some striking aspects of the party's historical imagination.

Prosaically, the Attlee government's nationalisations didn't get a look in. By contrast there was a pronounced emphasis throughout on education, on building and ambitious land use planning, as well as on the party's socially liberalising achievements. Striking in its own way was that its underlying premise was, very simply, that Labour governments are good things which 'deliver' for ordinary people. Starmer does not frequently invoke the party's heroic history, as others do, but when he does it is often to repeat a formula he deployed in his 2023 conference speech:

> If you think our job in 1997 was to rebuild a crumbling public realm; that in 1964 it was to modernise an economy left behind by the pace of technology; in 1945 to build a new Britain out of the trauma of collective sacrifice; then in 2024 it will have to be all three.[2]

Other, more historically minded members of the Shadow Cabinet – particularly Rachel Reeves and Nick Thomas-Symonds – have been drawn especially to the Wilson era, celebrating that government's achievements largely, not in terms of 'white heat', (which, after all, did not overcome Britain's relative economic decline) but rather the comprehensivisation of state education, the decriminalisation of abortion and male homosexuality, and the abolition of the death penalty.[3]

What I want to suggest is that it is possible to detect here a particular historical-ideological worldview. It holds that Labour exists as a 'transformative' party of government. Labour's historical role here is to win elections in order to pass progressive policies – in particular to build homes, to provide healthcare and

education, to sweep away outdated curbs on freedom and equality for women and minorities, and (in rather vague terms) to 'modernise' the economy. This is what they are there for. The rest is noise.

Labour history, old and new

This is, perhaps, exactly what you would expect. That a Labour Party campaigning to win a general election should declare that Labour governments have, in general, been very good things that implemented good policies might not appear an altogether interesting observation. New Labour, however, did not straightforwardly say that Labour governments had been good things, or that their policy programmes were effective. Its leading figures invented something called 'Old Labour', a sort of historical dustbin into which were piled Attleeite nationalisation, Wilsonite planning, Callaghanite corporatism, 'new urban left' municipal socialism, Militant Trotskyism, Michael Foot's 'donkey jacket' and cabinet government. The trademark rhetorical-historiographical move of the New Labour politician was to posit that through 'modernisation', the party was rescuing the (good) ethos of Labour from the (tired, ineffectual) practices once relied upon to realise that ethos.

As crude as this in some senses was, it nevertheless entailed a significant and creative engagement with the party's history and developments in the study of it. As Ben Jackson describes, Blair's distinctive contribution to how the party related to its past was a 'disenchantment' of Labour history. Where the normative Labour(ist) view of history, reflected in the rhetoric of both Attlee and Wilson, had posited the party as inheritors of a continuous thread of democratic radicalism reaching back into past centuries, Blair advanced an altogether more critical view of the party's past. This certainly reflected Blair's own anachronistic concerns with Labour's electoral failings of the (then) recent past; but nevertheless, it drew upon real developments within historical study of the British left, shaped by (and mediated through) the work of David Marquand, which had placed a greater emphasis on the role of the New Liberalism and had begun to challenge the heroic mythologies built up around Labour, charging the party with a naïvely uncritical posture towards the centralised British state and failure to assemble the sort of broad-based progressive coalition necessary to affect lasting change.[4] This was, in short, an account of British radical history which rejected 'Labourism' in favour of a 'progressivism' for which 'Old Labour' was an inadequate vehicle. It was a historical outlook tailored to a moment in which the party's leadership deemed that many of the old policies, assumptions and aesthetic trappings of Labour must be discarded to compete and govern effectively; bridges were being built to one-time SDP splitters and the Liberal Democrats more generally;

Thatcherism was, across the political spectrum, subject to critique in moral (rather than economic) terms; and constitutional radicalism was high on the agenda, in the wake of Charter 88.

The Miliband era brought with it its own efforts at historical revisionism, most (in) famously through variations of the Blue Labour analysis advanced by key figures around the leader. Blue Labour's cultural politics can in many ways be seen as an inversion of Marquand's 'progressive dilemma': the presumed challenge was not to orient a Labourist working-class party such as to secure the support of the progressive middle classes, but to bend a progressive middle-class party to speak to an alienated, culturally conservative 'labour interest'. In its distaste for 'technocrats' and embrace of the ethical socialist tradition, this perspective essentially rejected wholesale the party's achievements in government.[5] This made some sense in a context in which it was felt Labour had to disavow a Brownite statism, with New Labour in government presented as fiscally profligate and administratively remote in the wake of the financial crisis. This was a historical outlook shaped fundamentally by its political moment: the historical kinship between Labour and the Liberal Democrats no longer seemed of much political use, in the time of Clegg and Cameron's Rose Garden love-in; while the apparent success of the Conservatives' charge of overspending and advocacy of the 'Big Society' seemed, to some, to have struck at the cardinal weaknesses of Brownism. (The idea that the two were of anything close to comparable significance reveals just how much the early 2010s are a foreign country). This too was buttressed by historical scholarship, which made some effort to reconstruct a marginalised pluralist, ethical tradition.

The legacy of Blue Labour, and the wider influence of a post-liberal, declinist school of (popular) Labour history, was that the imaginative horizons of large parts of the party were transfixed between competing teleologies. On the one hand, a declinist reading drenched in nostalgia; on the other, the endurance of a progressivism which saw nostalgia as fundamentally regressive and modernness as a virtue in itself. These dispositions mapped onto a set of other rival positions – about financial capitalism and big tech, immigration and Brexit, regional policy and corporate governance, feminism and the problem of masculinity – although, strikingly, neither Blairite futurism nor Blue Labour sentimentalism allowed much space for the state as a force for dynamism or equality.

Corbynism of course offered its own attempt at a sort of re-enchantment: a socialist revivalism infused with an inchoate movementism spanning trade unionist celebrations at the Durham Miners' Gala and the youthful radicalism of the 2011 student protests. Both the Miliband and Corbyn projects then might be understood as doomed attempts at the 're-enchantment' of the Labour Party, restoring

the party's sense of itself as part of a rich history of democratic radicalism, but not altogether certain how to accommodate these efforts to a society in which the historic resonances of such causes had lost purchase.

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The sort of temporal handwringing about Labour's relationship to past and future characteristic of the last decade has certainly now receded. The Starmer leadership has not felt the need to take such questions head on, nor fostered with any enthusiasm efforts at historical revisionist thinking more in keeping with its own political project. It simply moved on. This is, after all, a Labour leadership which is by disposition and strategic choice rather less inclined to engage in the philosophising characteristic of past leaderships. Hence Labour's historical imagination today is both more limited and less concretely ideological. This reflects a wider truth: that Labour has achieved a historically unprecedented electoral recovery without the fundamental revision of social democracy's means, if not ends, that its more academically inclined supporters and commentators generally assumed to be politically necessary.

Observers of Starmerism have nevertheless frequently reached for historical analogies. Most have alighted upon the existence of *pre*-New Labour themes within the Starmerite party. Jon Cruddas characterises Starmer-Reeves economic policy in terms of a renovated Kinnockite 'supply-side socialism'. Indeed, Cruddas' frustration with the Labour leadership is explicitly that it has not channelled the surprisingly eclectic intellectual pluralism of early Blairism, in favour of a 'utilitarian' mentality he associates with the party's 'authoritarian' traditional right.[6] Steven Fielding prefers an analogy to Callaghanite corporatism.[7] More conventionally, it is of course Wilson who is cited. Wilson's rehabilitation as a canonically celebrated Labour great largely post-dates the intellectual development of Blairism, which was powerfully shaped by the desire to distance itself from the memories of Labour governments of the sixties and seventies. Today, the brand vulnerabilities with which Wilsonism was associated (the failures of corporatist planning, the 'propping-up' of 'lame duck' industries, trade union militancy) have lost the prejudicial force they once had in popular memory, while it is very easy to see Wilson's appeal to a socially mobile Labour frontbench which by and large believes in the capacity of the state, guided by expertise and partnered with the more dynamic elements of the private sector, to reverse economic decline and remedy Britain's social ills.

Indeed, Wilson is perhaps the closest thing there is to a normative Labour Prime Minister; a factionally ambiguous election winner, remembered not for great

betrayals or for achievements that could not be replicated, but for modest, managerial progress towards a more equal and civilised society. There is certainly something resonant about the vision of a highly credentialled technocrat, with a driving faith in modernising government and new technologies to better society; but one who could claim a connection to British working-class life (and hence a certain popular-democratic legitimacy) not through extra-parliamentary commitments, constitutionalism innovation (though some were attempted) or what we would now consider populism, but through personal biography and the artful deployment of it. Despite his knack for alienating his party's left and right in office, to identify with Wilson today is to position oneself in a demilitarised zone within Labour tradition. The productivist impetus of the Wilson governments, the idea that expertise can be marshalled by a modernised state in pursuit of efficiency and justice, and even the hope that Labour might be the default, solidly competent managerial governing option in turbulent times, all echo with Labour's new social-democratic imaginary, even if the specifics of 1960s indicative planning, industrial consolidation and payroll taxes are hardly likely to be providing direct inspiration.

What this certainly is not is a movementist vision, rooting the party within a tradition of popular radicalism and democratic struggle, as Miliband and Corbyn attempted to. But nor does it suggest interest in the more contentious revisionist tendencies within New Labour's version of party history. There is no sense of a special relationship with liberalism, no concessions (however elliptical) to dreams of cross-party collaboration, no mention of the party's pre-1924 past or paeans to 'ethical socialism', and no great hint of constitutional radicalism. Indeed, all these past imaginaries of Labour's roots suggested that the driving force of progress in British public life was not simply 'the Labour Party', but rather popular and intellectual currents of radicalism predating the party's rise. Today, such ideas are less visible. What we get is a simple, perhaps unreflective story of Labour governments making progressive change. The subaltern currents of a more decentralist, participatory or ethical socialism conjured by past leaders are no longer there. The ghosts of RH Tawney and GDH Cole have been laid to rest, for the time being, alongside the swirling modernising visions of Anthony Giddens. In their place, we have Plain Old Labour.

This is not an especially *exciting* historical imaginary. It doesn't have the iconoclasm present in Marquandian admonitions of the narrow, sectarian tendencies etched deep into dominant Labour traditions, or in Blue Labour's excoriations of Fabianism and yearning after the world of the Dockers' Strike. Nor does it have the unbridled popular-democratic zeal of Corbynism. In some respects, however, we might recognise that it is a positive development. Labour need no longer be haunted by the phantoms of its pre-1997 'wilderness years'. It has, after all, got

plenty of its own baggage from the last fourteen to contend with and which has informed attempts to position today's party within that normative Labour tradition.

Labour ultimately is not a vehicle for divine providence, the bearer of the hopes and dreams of long-gone strugglers for democracy; it is a political party whose purpose is to forge a winning coalition and make things better for the people it serves. It can take from its history a great deal of inspiration about the possibilities of extending democracy, equality and human freedom. But if it is offering a rather conventional social-democratic history, then that is perhaps because it is a rather conventional social-democratic party, which recognises that – unlike in the 1990s – there is space for more of an active state, stronger protections for workers, and even a little more public ownership. It has clearly recognised too that an older, more economically insecure electorate, exhausted by successive crises and by years of non-stop political upheaval, might find something appealing, even refreshing, in languages of class, service, and a politics which 'treads lightly on people's lives'.

There are limits and dangers to this; there are no firm sociological moorings for Labour to rely on, no innate ideological affinities between large parts of the British electorate and the under-interrogated assumptions that the party holds to. No one is saying that it is, on its own, enough. The character of the British state has been the undoing of Labourism before. The whirlwind the Labour government faces may not be surmountable. But given that good, solid social democracy has enjoyed rather a lot of success in humanising capitalism and enhancing human lives, it is not a bad means of ideological orientation when confronted with myriad crises and sharp distributional dilemmas; the constant, giddy pursuit of sweeping reinvention is not, *contra* Blair, what political parties exist to do. Old-fashioned, even boring, social-democratic instincts may even prove a better guide to our turbulent world than sweeping ideological visions. Not imaginative, but perhaps effective.

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Notes

1 Labour Party, X, 4 June 2024: 'This is the power of a Labour government': https://x.com/UKLabour/status/1797963928858988947

2 K. Starmer, speech to Labour Party conference, September 2023.

3 R. Reeves, *Alice in Westminster: The Political Life of Alice Bacon*, London. IB Tauris, 2016; N. Thomas Symonds, *Harold Wilson: The Winner*, London, Orion, 2022.

4 B. Jackson, 'The disenchantment of the Labour Party: socialism, liberalism and progressive history', in N. Yeowell (ed.), *Rethinking Labour's Past*, London, IB Tauris, 2022, pp25-38.
5 M. Glasman, J. Rutherford, M. Stears and S. White, *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, Oxford-London Seminars, 2011.
6 J. Cruddas, *A Century of Labour*, Cambridge, Polity, 2023.
7 Steven Fielding, 'How Starmer wants to reverse Thatcher's legacy': https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/how-starmer-wants-to-reverse-thatchers-legacy/ , 30 March 2024.