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Do As I Did Not As I Say: Blair, New Labour and party traditions

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Abstract

Corbynism, to its internal critics, is a 'hard left' anachronism. New Labour, to its detractors, was basically Thatcherism. We argue these meta narratives, critical to internal identity, are flawed. They are pulling the party apart for reasons of political strength and at the expense both of broader interpretation and longer term cohesion. Through an analysis of 'early' New Labour, we show how Blair's project ended is not how it began, and therefore isn't the whole story. The now half-forgotten history of New Labour in opposition holds important lessons, including for those trying, for the most part unsuccessfully, to keep the 'modernising' flame alive. If the modernisers are to win more converts to their cause they must learn to do what Blair and New Labour did in opposition and not what Blair says today. Drawing on the concept of Labour's 'ethos', we offer five lessons from the party's past.

Keywords: Corbyn, Blair, Labour, ethos, modernisers, socialism

5019 words

Introduction

For what sometimes feels like a political lifetime, everyday has been Groundhog Day in the Labour Party's civil war. The precise subject matter – from economic policy to electoral strategy – may change but the basic argument remains the same. The remnants of New Labour on the party's 'modernising' wing argue the Corbynite leadership does not give New Labour any credit for its past achievements; rests upon an outdated and overly simplistic critique of neoliberalism and global capitalism; and pays insufficient attention to voters at the political centre. Tony Blair has, at times, led this charge, describing Corbyn's project as being comprised of a 'small group of acolytes from the far Left'.[1] The Corbynite left, for its part, maintains that New Labour had few, if any, achievements and was responsible for many policy disasters; that Blair and his key supporters were, in essence, Thatcherites; and that their only ambition was to win elections. Blair was an alien who hijacked the party: 'an SDP viper in the Labour breast.'[2]

Politicians, commentators, activists and others all know their lines in this argument. We want to argue that the histories they batter each other with are, in one important respect, flawed. They have become meta narratives, critical to the identity of 'Corbynites' and 'moderates', yet pulling the party apart for reasons of political strength at the expense of broader interpretation. The comparison both sides make is between what New Labour said and did when it was in office – typically during its second and third terms following the 2001 and 2005 general elections – and what has happened since. Yet, to our mind, the more relevant and interesting comparison is between Corbyn's period as leader of the

opposition, and what New Labour said and did when it was in opposition up to 1997. Blair was clearly on the right of the party when he was elected leader in July 1994 and went on to proclaim the arrival of 'New' Labour as a means of signaling his break with the past. We are not going to argue that, deep-down, a misunderstood Blair was a radical socialist at heart. But we do maintain that, during this period, New Labour was far more politically nuanced than it was later to become.

Blair changed, New Labour's period in office became an era, and he was increasingly detached from his party and many of his colleagues. But how it ended is not how it began, and therefore isn't the whole story – nor the only identity 'moderates' today can show affinity for. Blair today draws, constantly, a distinction between the 'politics of protest' and the 'politics of governance'. His politics, he said, mean he's the 'guy on the placard' rather than the person holding it.[3] Politicians must show that they are capable of taking tough decisions if they are to achieve credibility with 'ordinary', centre-ground voters. Yet, whilst in opposition, Blair, we want to argue, was quite different, drawing upon key tenets of left-wing thinking in his assaults upon the Conservatives while adopting policies with widespread party appeal.

The now half-forgotten history of this period holds important lessons for those trying, for the most part unsuccessfully, to keep the modernising flame alive. Whilst the Labour Party's civil war shows no sign of ending, the modernisers have nevertheless taken a decade-long beating. In the 2015 Labour leadership contest, Liz Kendall, the modernisers' candidate, secured 4.5% of the vote. In the 2016 contest, the modernisers

voted for Owen Smith but, for the most part, kept a deliberately low profile. The breakaway of seven Labour MPs to form the Independent Group further weakened the modernisers' cause. Whatever the fate of Jeremy Corbyn after the next general election, it is clear that the Labour Party has, over the last decade, shifted significantly to the left. If the modernisers are to win more converts to their cause they must learn to do what Blair and New Labour did in opposition and not what Blair says today. They must find ways of constructing political alliances across the Party and to avoid the kind of one-sided sectarian politics that the left of the party argues New Labour practiced and that the modernisers in the party now accuse the Corbynites of replicating. For Corbyn, if he achieves power, or if his project continues under different leadership, his supporters must begin to recognize the complexity and legitimacy of Labour's varied traditions.

Blair's 1982 lecture

In November 1980 Michael Foot narrowly beat Denis Healey, the candidate of the Labour right, to become Labour's leader. Dismayed by Labour's culture, some MPs broke-away and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) entered the political scene. At that time, the Conservatives, deeply divided and mired in recession, looked likely to implode. Yet, it did not work out that way. The economy slowly began to recover and the invasion of the Falkland Islands in April 1982 gave Margaret Thatcher a shot at political redemption. On the 27th May 1982, with British forces engaged in the Battle of Goose Green, the Conservatives won the Beaconsfield by-election. Labour's candidate, Tony Blair, came third and lost his deposit. A few months later, Blair visited Australia, where he had lived

as a child, and delivered a paper to the politics department at Murdoch University in Perth. The content of this lecture, while rarely noted in the literature on New Labour, makes for fascinating reading.

Blair began by arguing that Labour's electoral prospects were poor and had been made poorer by the SDP. He however showed no sympathy with those who had broken-away. The SDP largely appealed to 'middle-aged and middle-class erstwhile Labour members, who have grown too fat and affluent to feel comfortable with Labour and whose lingering social consciences prevent them from voting Tory'.[4] The SDP was draining voters away from Labour but it appealed to those who 'cluster around anything new' and 'profess to be non-political'. Raising the stakes, Blair went on to eviscerate the right of the party who had remained within Labour. Its leaders had 'basked for too long in the praise of the leader writers of the *Financial Times*, *Times* and *the Guardian'*. Under their stewardship, the party had become too timid and predictable. Any Labour Government which followed Thatcher would come into 'sharp conflict with the power of capital, particularly multinational capital'. That conflict would be a 'painful' but 'vital' experience. Blair then went on to take aim at the idea that Labour should aim to become the natural party of government. A failure to listen had seen Labour's establishment become 'managers of a conservative country'.

For its part, the left of the Labour Party was culpable because of its dogmatic commitment to outdated ideologies (read Marxism) and its naive view that it could win the next election on the back of the votes of the working-class and liberal metropolitans. But, at the same

time, Blair recognised that the 1979 defeat and the subsequent influx of new, left-wing, party activists had changed the party 'irreversibly'. This was, Blair argued, no bad thing in so far as it had invigorated campaigns and stimulated new thinking. He said the 'powerful appeal of the left to the fundamental socialist instincts of the Party,' along with an election defeat, had 'overwhelmed the tired excuses of pragmatism from the Labour right ... by pointing to the election defeat, the left were able to dispose of the continual refrain of the right-wing that moderation was essential to the retaining of power.' Moreover, these left-wing activists, dismissed out-of-hand by the right of the party as sectarian and divisive, had brought to the party a genuine interest in issues like the environment and social equality which were both important and potentially of appeal to non-core voters. What was needed, Blair concluded, was a Labour Party which drew on elements of, but nevertheless transcended, left and right.

What should we make of Blair's analysis? 1982 is of course a lifetime ago. Yet, with the notable exception of its 'third way' approach to overcoming and moving beyond left and right, it is striking just how different this Tony Blair sounds. The right-wing breakaways who have tired of the left-wing leadership are castigated; the right of the party berated for having treated elected office as an end in itself; and left-wing activists welcomed for their new thinking on issues like the environment when Blair today has expressed severe doubts about the Green New Deal and its talented champions like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.[5] It is perhaps tempting therefore to argue that Blair, who was still searching for a safe Labour constituency from which to fight the next election, was simply playing it politically safe: saying nice, token, things about the left because the left was in the political

ascendancy. But this does not feel entirely plausible. Murdoch University was far removed from the day-to-day of Labour Party politics and it seems far more likely that Blair, in the aftermath of the Beaconsfield by-election, was offering a sincere set of reflections on the state of British politics. Furthermore, and looking forward, clear traces of Blair's thinking can be seen in his approach, more than a decade later, to the Labour Leadership.

Blair and socialism

Blair entered parliament in 1983 decrying, in his maiden speech, tax cuts for the 'wealthy and privileged'. Later, as shadow Treasury spokesperson, he described the Conservative privatisation programme as a 'plunder' akin to the 'sacking of the monasteries'. By the time he became Shadow Home Secretary in 1992, Blair was clearly established with the right of the party and the same held true when he contested the 1994 leadership contest: beating John Prescott and Margaret Beckett. Yet, in his leadership campaign, Blair's pitch was carefully designed to also appeal to votes on the left of the party. He was uncompromising in denouncing Thatcherism for its appeal to 'self-interest' and 'at its worst, just greed'. A speech on education policy delivered in Manchester began with a tribute to Fabian summer schools and the socialist tradition of self-learning and improvement. In talking about welfare, Blair denounced Conservative cuts and, borrowing from Harold Wilson and in tribute to John Smith, reminded his audience that 'the Labour Party is crusade for social justice or it is nothing'. Blair was also happy to use and to describe himself as a socialist: albeit a socialism which he was careful to demarcate into 'ethical' (good) and 'scientific' (bad) strands. In eventually securing 58% of the

constituency membership vote, Blair demonstrated a clear capacity to attract support beyond the right of the party in a way that simply became unthinkable from the 2000s onwards.

Once elected, Blair started to describe Labour as New Labour and, in doing so, seemed to serve notice of a fundamental demarcation between what had happened to Labour in the past and what it had become. Should we therefore see the tentative appeals offered to the left during the leadership campaign as simple and rather meaningless campaign sops? Reading ahead to what was to come when New Labour was in office, it is tempting to do so. But, at the time, Blair actually went out of his way, unnecessarily given the strength of his position, to present New Labour as an exercise in rejuvenating but respecting the party's traditional values. This was the centrepiece of Blair's Fabian pamphlet, *Socialism*, which argued for greater clarity in the party's objectives and enhanced intellectual self-confidence whilst offering reassurance to party members about respecting Labour's traditions. 'For almost two decades,' Blair argued, 'the left has felt itself on the defensive. Having fashioned the post-war consensus of 1945, its intellectual confidence became sapped by its own inner doubts, the problems of government in the 1960s and 1970s and the onslaught of the right through Thatcherism.'[6] The solution, he suggested was to 'regain the intellectual high ground, stating with clarity its [Labour's] true identity and historic mission. In doing so, it must show how this is not a break with its past or its traditions but, on the contrary, a rediscovery of their true meaning'. As leader of the party, Blair was not shy of talking about socialism and his political philosophy. None of this is particularly 'Mondeo man'.

To his critics on the left, Blair's subsequent crusade to rewrite Clause IV of the party's constitution was a demonstration of just how hollow such commitments of fidelity to traditional values really were. It certainly feels significant that Blair was willing to push the issue in relation to clause IV in a way that his predecessors had shied away from. Yet from Gordon Brown's perspective, which Blair acknowledged, the point of rewriting Clause IV was to show that 'fundamental socialist values endure and continue to inspire, which is why they should be clearly reflected in both the Labour Party constitution and in Labour Party policy'.[7] Besides, it is easy to forget not only that Blair eventually secured landslide support for the amendment, but the revised text, while eschewing reference to common ownership, was in other respects quite an uncontroversial statement of Labour's creed.

With the Clause IV change approved by March 1995 and with Labour far ahead in the polls, Blair nevertheless continued to discuss ideas. For a short while, 'communitarianism', with its Republican emphasis on the rights and duties citizens owe to each other and to their government moved into view. Then, in January 1996, Blair grabbed, unexpectedly, the language of stakeholding as a shield against accusations that he had no real convictions and that Labour would say and do anything to get elected. Influenced by the journalist Will Hutton, who had just published *The State We're In*, Blair argued that the economy was being disfigured by an ideology which viewed firms as 'mere vehicles for the capital market to be traded, bought and sold as a commodity' and which discouraged long-term investment, good relationships with workers, productivity and trust. Blair was light on the details of his stakeholding alternative. But the speech was an

intentionally radical one, aligning New Labour with long-standing and determinedly left-wing assaults on British capitalism. David Miliband, then an aide to Blair, was relieved that Blair had found a progressive thread for his own narrative on economics. Indeed Blair finished his speech with a paean to a future Britain 'for the many and not the few'.

New Labour's early policy

Looking beyond the ideological gesturing, what, during this period of opposition, was New Labour's policy record? Blair was constantly under attack from the Conservatives who argued that New Labour was a chimera and that, if elected, Blair would be a prisoner of the left and of the unions. In response, a strategic decision was taken by the campaign team to offer a limited manifesto in 1997 focused upon a small set of specific promises. This way, it was hoped, the Conservatives' attack could be blunted whilst Labour would, if elected, be in a better position to deliver upon all of its promises and so deflect the charges of betrayal which had been levelled against the leadership by previous generations of party leaders.

Yet, in one respect, the process of preparing the manifesto was a radical one and signaled a clear break with past practice. In order to be seen to be attracting support from all sides of the party, and so to protect the leadership from charges that the party was hopelessly divided, Blair experimented with membership votes on an 'early' manifesto, and toured the country speaking to Labour members and supporters about the party's policies. This was not in any real sense a deliberative form of internal party democracy. It was a take it

or leave it approach to endorsing a document. But it was a process that New Labour's leadership nevertheless invested significant time and resource in and one that Blair saw as being a part of the solution to the 'head and body problem': that of the leadership expressing one message (in this case, a modernising one) to a party that seemed begrudging at best, and hostile at worst (and wanting a more 'traditional' approach).

What of the policies themselves? Looking back, these were an eclectic mix. No doubt still scarred by Labour's 1992 defeat, some of the headline policies were premised upon the need to appeal to previously Conservative voters. Most significantly, Labour promised not to raise taxes and to abide by Conservative spending plans; leave unchanged the vast majority of Conservative trade union reforms; and not to reverse past privatisations. These were policies which, quite clearly, the left of the party and, for that matter, much of its traditional right-wing found difficult to accept. Labour also attracted much criticism for its promises to introduce 'fast-track' punishment for young offenders and for elements of 'workfare' compulsion within its plans to reduce youth unemployment.

Yet, at the same time, the 1997 manifesto contained policies which, judged in that context, were radical and sometimes innovative and which appealed to voters on the left. Perhaps most obviously, Labour retained the commitment it had made in 1992 to a statutory minimum wage. It promised to abolish the Conservative's NHS 'internal market' which it described as tantamount to privatisation, and also the market-based nursery voucher scheme. Constitutionally, New Labour promised to remove hereditary peers from the House of Lords; create a devolved Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly; and

incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into British law. In a way which has since been largely forgotten, New Labour also promised to introduce a 'windfall tax' upon the privatised utilities. Blair and his close team, including Alastair Campbell, did, as the election approached, express concerns that this new tax would alienate business. However, they concluded that the political benefits outweighed the potential costs and persevered. Gordon Brown was adamant that the public were ready to see politicians condemn 'fats cats' and boardroom greed.

Lessons for today's Labour Party

The Labour Party has not won an election for nearly fifteen years. In that time, it has experienced remarkable internal change and continues to witness near weekly turmoil. We do not have the space here to litigate the rights and wrongs of the last opposition decade. Instead we focus on one question: has Labour learnt the right lessons from *early* New Labour? Understandably much of the 2010 defeat fallout, and subsequent leadership elections have been defined by discourse on New Labour's lengthy spell in office. This is legitimate and important. The financial crisis posed a challenge to social democracy in many countries. The poisonous legacy of the Iraq War will shape public and political attitudes to UK foreign policy for generations. And these are just two of the issues from Labour's last period in office.

Yet, having experienced a decade of opposition, we are struck by how Labour's most recent previous spell out of office has either been bundled in with the period in

government, or willfully overlooked. There are some signs that among those most supportive of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership – both inside and outside of parliament – that the years 1994-1997 have some relevance: for example, in the occasionally mooted redrafting of Labour's aims and objectives. But among those Labour politicians most sympathetic to the Blair and Brown years, which Labour's deputy leader, Tom Watson, has attempted to bring together as Labour's 'social democratic' tradition, there remains a rather one-dimensional approach of reflecting on the rights and wrong of the last Labour government. To conclude, we offer a series of connected lessons from our analysis of New Labour's early history.

First, opposition is very different to governing. This seems obvious, but such was the mentality that a generation of Labour politicians left office with in 2010, we think it is an essential point. The burdens opposition imposes are different. In particular, it shows the benefits of seeking a base of support not only across the electorate but within the party. By the time Blair announced his intention to leave office, the contempt the left of the party felt toward him was almost limitless. Talk of stakeholding was long-gone and Blair was as keen to talk about globalisation and economic competition as he was desperate to avoid talking about socialism. Any credit once gained from the minimum wage, significant spending increases on the NHS and education and devolution had been more than eclipsed by public private partnerships, private sector involvement in the NHS and of course Iraq. The feeling of anger was mutual. Blair still occasionally peppered his speeches with references to the views of 'ordinary' party members in Trimdon. But he had long since lost patience with the party he led.

In his 2006 conference speech, Blair warned that 'the danger for us today is not reversion to the politics of the 1980s… It is unconsciously to lose the psychology of a governing party'.[8] This 'psychology' was the familiar Blair mantra of taking 'tough' decisions, and being prepared to be unpopular – at least temporarily – before respect for your ability to 'get things done' won the people back. Yet, whilst in opposition, Blair had played things very differently and this was a key part of his success. Blair was sensitive to and, at times, respectful of the different political traditions within the Labour Party. Knowing how things were to eventually end, it is tempting to see this strategy as being intentionally insincere: a ruse to acquire temporary support from the left before securing office. Given the way in which we have described how Blair's approach to opposition was grounded in an analysis he had developed in the early 1980s, we don't find the charge of insincerity particularly convincing. Instead, we think it far more likely that, for better or worse, it was the experience of governing which changed Blair's outlook. Yet, regardless of whether or not it was sincere, Blair benefited politically from the way in which he was able to reconcile parts of the left to New Labour.

Second, New Labour's opposition years show the value of an approach to reframing historical analysis which transcends divisions. Blair's Australia lecture was a case in point. He criticised Labour's left and right, and he lauded Labour's left and right. Recognising the strengths and weaknesses of the different factions within the Labour Party is, to put it mildly, no longer a regular occurrence. Indeed just hours before the start of the 2019 Labour Party Conference, the left of the party mobilized to abolish the post of Deputy Leader in what Tom Watson described as a 'drive-by-shooting'. Blair denounced the

move and, interestingly, did so in a way intended to draw a clear contrast with his own leadership of accommodating different views.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Blair was undoubtedly part of an internal political struggle within the Labour Party. And he benefited, in this respect, from the struggles of both Neil Kinnock and then John Smith to marginalise the left. Yet Blair strengthened his position in so far as he was able to attack both the intellectual laziness and complacency of the right of the party as well as the failings of the left of the party. For the Labour modernisers today, recognising their weaknesses, and reaching out (truly) to other parts of the party feels like a risk. Yet, in the inevitable contests and struggles for power within the party just around the corner, those who can recognise the weakness of their 'wing' can more credibly lay claim to the strengths of the whole movement. It's not just the 'right' thing to do if you believe in a cohesive, strengthened Labour Party. Strategically, it's an attractive proposition to those who want to support the party.

Third, the Labour politicians and strategists of today must recognise and remember the importance of the party's ethos as well as its policies. In a classic account of the Labour Party, Henry Drucker defined ethos as the traditions, beliefs, procedures and feelings which 'animate' Labour.[9] Identification with the rituals and language of the working class, either through birth or through a process of socialisation, are incredibly important to Labour's ethos as well. Labour's origins, and its ethos, includes consideration of the building of institutions as a defence for working class communities in the face of untrammelled market forces. It involves comprehending the language and acts of

‘solidarity’ among working people, and the cautious engagement with parliamentary politics. So too the relationship between working class communities, trade unions and political movements of Liberal, socialist (of which there are many variants) and Marxist forms, as well as the powerful influence of Christianity and its different sects in Britain. These add up to more than iconography, important as that is. They demonstrate a blend of motivations, aspirations and objectives, all present – quite legitimately – in the competing traditions of Labour’s ethos through the party’s history.

The nature of shared and competing traditions is that Labour Party people agree on some issues – often the less controversial – and disagree on others. Things like party democracy, and the extent of leadership freedom on policymaking, are connected to the party’s ethos. The crude, but instructive divide between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ socialists speak to fundamentally different approaches to Labour politics and strategy, and this stems from the party’s ethos. Similarly, there is a constant tug and pull between those who claim to be ‘pragmatic’ and those who ‘stick to principle’. In reality, people display a blend of the two. These all affect policy – the doctrine – but they are matters of ethos.

Why is this important to the debates about Blair and New Labour? We contend that Blair did not remake or seek to destroy Labour’s ethos – these are traditions both inscribed within the institution of the Labour Party, and beliefs held by people. Perhaps more importantly, we argue that Blair – in the opposition period we analyse in this article – was recognisably Labour in his interpretations of the party’s ethos and in his recognition of

dominant traditions in his party that he may not have subscribed to, but considered legitimate anyway. Blair blended radicalism with a government-in-waiting culture of competence. This was not simply a case of saying the right thing, 'sounding' Labour, or embracing parts of the party's iconography.

Blair's Sedgefield constituency was critical to his political development and judgement, affording him the opportunity of connection with the party's roots, and to the longstanding working class traditions of the Durham coalfield. This is not always easy to achieve. While challenging Corbyn in 2016 for the leadership, Owen Smith gave a newspaper interview in a café in his Pontypridd constituency. Receiving a 'frothy coffee', Smith 'stopped mid-sentence to express some amusement. "I tell you it is the first time I have ever been given little biscuits and a posh cup in here," Smith said, looking up at the owner… "Seriously, I would have a mug normally,"'.[10] Doubts over whether the South Wales MP really did normally have his cappuccino in a mug were raised.

Fourth, you don't have to have purely 'centre ground policies' to be perceived as attractive to voters located at the political centre. The Blair who worked for years to convince his party of a different kind of socialism, or social democracy, was very different to the Blair who left office focused on 'policies that work' or the more recent incarnation of Blair as someone seeking policies to define an electoral centre, rather than the other way around. The latter is reminiscent of the 'non-political' approach to politics that Blair associated with and used to attack the SDP. The same can be said of the 'Independent Group' of MPs who, in their determination to present themselves as centrist, found it impossible to say

anything about any policy other than Brexit. Here ideology is confused with dogmatism, and the Blair of today has fallen into this trap. ‘Values’ are considered to be acceptable, but there is little in the way of a coherent political philosophy to steer and guide one’s politics. Instead, a ‘centre’, informed by public attitudes and responses to different policies or objectives, is identified. Such an approach to politics is inherently technocratic, because it is not based on ideas. It forgets, or willfully ignores for the sake of expedience, that the electorate believing a particular policy to be ‘centre ground’ will itself be a constructed belief. Public beliefs in a ‘centre’ for government spending over the last decade have been constructed, often skilfully, by politicians of right and left.[11]

Our fifth and final point goes to the generational and cultural aspect of politics. Opposition politicians must not be caught out of time, fighting a battle that a younger generation has moved on from. In part, this includes recognising – as Blair did in his Australia lecture – that new generations of political actors and activists bring new ways of conducting politics, and new priorities to the table. This is not something to be resented. Indeed, age is a key divide electorally and advantageous for Labour. Labour’s famous ‘broad church’ must make room for the new social movements, and the new voices calling for change.

Conclusion

The lessons we offer for today’s Labour Party are based on the rejection of two common behaviours often on display: caricatures of Labour’s personalities and projects, past and present; and the denial of legitimacy for Labour’s competing traditions. Both behaviours

can appear attractive to the leaders of Labour's factions. But the short term effects – aiding differentiation, helping to win an argument or a vote – are more than smothered by the long term costs. For Labour to not disintegrate over the next decade, its past and present leaders must be more honest and less divisive.

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