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Labour's First Century

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Nick Tiratsoo

Duncan Tanner

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Labour's First Century is a good barometer of the state of intellectual Thinking within and about Labour as it looks forward to its second century. Its tone differs from that of the fiftieth anniversary histories. Then, the Labour Party had much to celebrate - the creation of a mixed economy, a free health service, planning for full employment and, for many, the hope of a socialist society which could emancipate human needs. Now, historians merely praise the fact that Labour is in touch with public opinion to the extent that it wins elections.

The genuine novelty of 'New Labour', and the need to understand that novelty in the light of historical scholarship, is recognized by a particularly interesting set of essays by historians such as Nick Tiratsoo, Steven Fielding and Jon Lawrence. Their work is a reflection of Blair's political and intellectual triumph over the old Left. The other essays - by solid historians such as Jose Harris and Miles Taylor - are interesting and informative, but lack the thrust of any coherent intellectual project such as that which informs Nick Tiratsoo and his friends.

Most disappointing, the lack of any coherent or exciting intellectual framework with which to confront that project indicates the extent to which the post-Socialist Left is in intellectual crisis. The illiberal attitude to thought and debate which is so characteristic of New Labour is reflected in the approach of writers such as Duncan Tanner, who hails the denial of participation to the Left while moaning about the fact that it is denied to people whose views are more accommodating to our society (p.249). This is not any way forward, intellectually or politically.

The new ideas presented in this book are a reflection of a mindset which is as iconic as that of my youth. Then, the younger historians used a neo-Leninist language to present the idol of a left-wing vanguard leading a passive and deluded mass of industrial workers, or of the workers creating their own class-consciousness through direct action. Now they use a deconstructionist language to hold up an icon of 'normal' people humbly trying to better themselves and their families through hard work while happily enjoying a light entertainment suited to their modest expectations of life, betrayed by left-wing intellectual elitists and finally given a voice by a Labour Party re-dedicated to their service.

Jon Lawrence presents this latter view at its most powerful in the fascinating essay, 'Labour - the myths it has lived by', in which he seeks to explore the myths which have informed the popular histories of the party internalised by activists. He stresses the need to avoid mere debunking, and denies that mythic is a synonym for 'untrue'. Instead, he sees myths as a crucial means of understanding how a party constructs its collective identity - they are shared stories about the past, shaping Labour's political identity, regardless of their veracity. Concentrating on life-stories as rich in myth and as constituting a large part of the political mind of the party activists, he seeks to dissect a selection of myths which have held a sacrosanct place for Old Labour activists - those of foundation, betrayal, party divisions and party triumph.

This is a genuinely fresh approach. The over-worked analysis of MacDonald's 'betrayal' of 1931 is presented through its effect on the legend created for and by party activists, while the author points to the neglected myths of the 1920s, where individuals such as MacDonald or John Wheatley were portrayed as courageous pioneers standing alone against anti-socialist mobs to purge the party of jingoism.

The problem lies in the use of the word 'myth'. Instead of employing less loaded terms such as 'symbol' or 'discourse' in an attempt to attain some sort of value-neutrality, the author uses 'myth', a term which carries the inevitable connotation of a fictitious narrative of some sort. The difference can be clearly seen by contrasting the idea of Churchill as a symbol of wartime unity with that of Churchill as embodying the myth of that unity. Despite his expressed intention, the author elides the meanings of 'symbol' and fictitious 'myth' throughout.

This elision, almost inevitable once he uses the term 'myth', leads to a continual movement between a mere description of stories narrated by party activists and a (not always implicit) critique of the fictions created by them. The author's continual use of quotation marks around the term 'betrayal', or his plea to New Labour not to concede the past to its enemies, are only the most obvious expressions of this. Where it gets in the way of analysis is in the implicitly critical approach to the Old Labour symbols of the pioneers - for example, John Wheatley's stand against the mob (pp.345-46) is discussed as a story in which the mob is 'portrayed as unruly and deeply ignorant..the pawns of unscrupulous leaders', while Wheatley emerges as the individual whose simple courage enlightens them. The author's stance throughout is that of an outsider coolly dissecting this prejudice-laden myth, and by implication it becomes a critique of a left-wing fantasy questioning whether the mob does have the false consciousness attributed to it.

However, there is such a thing as the courage of an individual who stands against the crowd - Hannah Arendt, in *Men in Dark Times*, shows a fascination with such characters. A mob is not a myth, though it may be described in terms of an archetype - mobs of any political complexion can be frightening and can take on a violent psychology of their own (as Elias Canetti demonstrated in *Crowds and Power*). An explanation of this crowd power is needed, and for that one may point back to the King and Church mobs of the 1790s and their continuity with the pro-war mobs of 1914-18 which were so vivid in radical memory.

Myths, true or not, require explanation, and explanation involves some sort of criterion against which to measure the nature of the stories. It may even involve veracity at some level, if only in terms of understanding values. The author cannot avoid this - look at his quotation marks around 'betrayal' or his discussion of why the SDP were not seen as traitors from the late 1980s or his argument that Labour's myths of division have really been intensely personal affairs (p.359). We need to understand why the myths were held, or why they change shape, with reference to a variety of factors, ranging from immediate political circumstances through changes in society to the nature of traditions.

Through symbols and archetypes, the construction of an identity involves seizing on a series of events and suffusing them with an emotion and (melo)drama whose inspiration motivates action. New Labour is developing its own 'myths', or inspiring stories - usually centred around irresponsible left-wing fanatics halted by a young leadership which takes the party from the wilderness of the political desert to an election victory even more satisfying than the 1945 landslide - and their endurance will be tested by time. It would be through the explanation of these stories rather than a mere description of 'myths' that this fascinating essay could fulfil its promise rather than end by taking us into the byways of a political project.

Steve Fielding, in 'New Labour and the Past', takes up Jon Lawrence's warning to New Labour not to concede the past to its enemies by engaging in a study of how far New Labour was a continuation of the New Liberals at the turn of the last century. Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether he is talking about an ideology or a Lib-Lab coalition, as New Liberalism is never really identified. When he describes the revisionists as really New Liberals, and lumps together genuine revisionists like Roy Jenkins with 'social democrats' like David Owen, he runs the danger of confusing different political ideologies, undermining our understanding of revisionism as much as New Liberalism. As an ideology, New Labour certainly has continuities with past traditions, but its novelty is what is important (see my discussion of Jose Harris's article for more on this). There is little discussion of specific ideological traditions here, and the ideology of New Labour continues to elude an accurate description.

Nick Tiratsoo, in 'Labour and the Electorate', discusses Labour's initial hopes of electoral domination and the party's eventual decline in electoral support. He uses a mixture of electoral statistics, interviews and homely comments drawn from oral histories to put forward an argument which any politician worth her salt knows with a gut instinct - that the British electorate is fundamentally conservative with a small 'c'. However, the reason for this conservatism is what is important, and this is unexplored.

To argue that Labour lost its support because it ceased to express the aspirations of its electorate is to assume what needs to be explained. The New Labour argument points to the betrayal of normal people by left-wing elitists, but this ignores the fact that the first serious and permanent loss of Labour votes mainly occurred in the 1966-68 period, a time when Labour was not presenting any kind of radical face to the world. The decline in solidaristic voting, the rise of secular voting (long ago pointed to by McKenzie and Silver in *Angels in Marble*) and the disappointments of the Wilson Government together provided the catalyst for the rise of the Left as much as for Labour's fall in electoral support. The author's belief that New Labour has failed to overcome the problems of a nepotistic party organisation rooted in male prejudice (but isn't that prejudice a reflection of the views of 'ordinary' people?) could serve as a reason for the party leadership not to extend participation in decision-making just yet.

Duncan Tanner would be as unhappy with this as Nick Tiratsoo. His essay, 'Labour and its Membership', hails the party officials, election agents, intellectuals, backbenchers and unsung heroes who fought for a

'constructive socialism' (p249). The author argues that when party workers were 'less constructive and representative', the desire of the leadership to deny them any say in affairs was understandable, but now that the members more or less agree with the leadership, it is no longer justified.

Using statistics, minute books and local accounts, this essay presents an account of changing geographical patterns of membership and successfully argues that party members have been in agreement with the leadership more often than is credited, with exceptional periods such as the 1930s and the 1980s. He also seeks to explore grass-roots life in the party, and argues that the party leadership has consistently under-used the idealism and intelligence of its members. The introduction of a broader franchise by Neil Kinnock has intensified this problem, as new members are in genuine agreement with the leadership on questions of public ownership and radical challenges to society, yet still find themselves excluded from decision-making.

Of course, no amount of minutes or filtered memories are a substitute for the countless unrecorded individuals and arguments at the ward and constituency level, where life has from the start been characterised by cantankerous individualists and Communist/Trotskyist entryists as much as leadership loyalists and left-wing idealists. Such a portrait of party life cannot be assessed, much less presented.

The problem is that memories and accounts tend to be coloured by what is regarded as 'constructive' and what is regarded as 'alien' by the writer's own political values. My own impressionistic memories of the Barrow Labour Party in the late 1960s, where I was a member of the GMC, was one of working-class people angered by the government's attacks on welfare services and wages, and virulent arguments over trade union reform which were not necessarily reflected in the minutes. Were these working class people 'ordinary', or alien because left wing?

Perish the cynical thought that the membership of the party in the last decade or so may have been authoritarian supporters of whatever the leadership wanted, rather than conscientious moderates - but I also remember from the Oxford University Labour Club in the late 1980s the response of one woman party member to Palestinians being alive by Israeli soldiers - 'well, they must be trouble-makers, mustn't they?' More complimentary stories could be told, I am sure. That is the problem with the impressionistic accounts being used - they capture a point brilliantly, but their overall reliability as an index of anything greater than personal interest is dubious.

The other essays are always interesting, but there is an absence of any intellectual challenge to the dominant arguments presented by the above authors. This is not a reflection on the New Labour viewpoint, but on the lack of a genuine alternative in the wake of the collapse of any organised socialist opposition.

I was particularly interested in the essay, 'Labour's political and social thought' by Jose Harris. She sees the primary dilemma facing Labour as encapsulated in a dual approach to political theory which has existed since the party's foundation - is Labour merely a machine to win elections, in which theory plays a pragmatic role, or is it out to forge a new kind of society and polity? She refuses to discuss the ideological battles which have marked out the 'drama' of Labour's history, on the grounds that they pose artificial frontiers between ideas when in reality there is much more of an interaction of Left and Right thinking. Instead, she concentrates on a number of classic themes rooted in British intellectual traditions and looks at the manner in which Labour intellectuals handled such themes. A brief historical analysis of thinking on issues such as social evolution, property, liberty and planning follow, leading her to the conclusion that much New Labour thinking is not new at all, but an echo of Edwardian progressive thought.

The problem is that political theory and ideologies cannot be approached merely in an analytical manner - when they are related to a dynamic political organism such as the Labour Party, then the ideas themselves take on a dynamic which is much greater than their intellectual coherence. This dynamic is buried when a thematic approach to certain concepts is taken, and as a result something very important is lost.

Ideas are a living part of political history, and cannot be treated as reflections of politics - they have a chronology and consistency of their own. The dynamic of Labour thinking is controlled by the history of a

political party seeking power and (usually) willing to compromise ideas in order to obtain it. It is not a question of giving Labour thought an artificial coherence; the coherence is provided by the dynamic - the 'drama' - of Labour's history as a party seeking power, and of various political and economic interest groups fighting within that party for internal power. Within that struggle, there is a great deal of interaction of different ideologies and theories, but it is an interaction which mainly depends on the play of power rather than on any philosophical coherence. Labour thought is thus given an external coherence by Labour's history, and that allows us to explore the intellectual frontiers of different ideologies to mark out their differences as much as their similarities.

The ideological conflict may be missing now, but it was not always so. Crosland's revisionism was not merely a contribution to general theoretical themes of planning and liberty, but belonged to a particular political struggle against Bevanism and the corporatist politics of the Attlee Government. It was part of a 'drama' in its way, which gave the ideas their energy to contemporaries. It was also a critical yardstick against which to measure the corporatist commitment to economic efficiency expressed by Harold Wilson, and its echoes now expressed in Roy Hattersley's politics are recognized as a critical yardstick against which to measure New Labour's lack of radicalism. To restrict Labour thinking to a series of analytical themes in political theory, as Jose Harris does, is to risk treating ideas historically - ideas without reference to conflicts in time.

This has its consequences for the understanding of New Labour. Of course the thinking of today's Labour Party contains echoes of much progressive thought, and not just Edwardian, but it is also qualitatively new. Ideas which were radical in one context have to be understood in a very different manner in a new context of post-Thatcherism, and the ending of the Attlee consensus. To avoid anachronistic misunderstanding, they need to be related to past traditions and then related to the new historical context. Therein lies the great controversy and disagreement, but that is what makes history so exciting anyway.

Of the other essays, Alastair Reid's essay on 'Labour and the Trade Unions' points to the complexity of the relationship between the two bodies, and sees the root of this complexity at the party's foundations in 1900. However, an account of union development in the 19th century, followed by brief descriptions of the unions' impact on party policy and finances, leaves the reader with a feeling of an over-formal analysis. There has been a changing composition of unions in terms of their political power as wielded in the TUC, and thereby the Labour party - the growth of the general unions after 1920, superseding most of the craft unions, followed by the growth of white-collar and public-service unions with a predominantly female membership. The divisions between union activists, both official and unofficial, and a membership for whom the union stands at best as a guarantee of private securities are also unexplored.

One would search in vain for any analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the second shop stewards movement (or the first, for that matter), which probably explains the author's under-estimation of the strength of the Left in the unions throughout their history, and his strange assertion that Clause 4 was unimportant (p.228). There is a serious account of the decline of union influence within New Labour, but this is given merely to serve as a call for party and unions to work more closely together. Instead of an analysis of the ambiguous and tense relations between New Labour and the unions, we are given the tactical pleas of a Labour activist.

Jim Tomlinson's essay, 'Labour and the Economy' is a solid account of the winding path of Labour's economic policies. He rightly points to the rise and decline of national economic management, and argues that a project of economic modernisation has dominated thinking about policy in the party. The long-established thesis of economic decline caused by an aged infrastructure explains the obsession with modernisation, an obsession which the author admits is not restricted to Labour, but the reasons for the rise and decline of ideas of central economic management are unexplored. Instead, the author's thinking is governed by the politics of the day - he is not going to get into any trouble by his acceptance of market forces, or his rejection of public ownership, and the uncritical commitment to income redistribution is asserted in the same way as one would express firm support for the NSPCC. The more disturbing issues connected with the quasi-privatisation of the Bank of England by Gordon Brown, or the consequences of the

1979 abolition of exchange controls for any government, are set aside.

He does make the interesting argument that there have been impressive continuities in Labour's thinking about the economy which have been the expression of ethical or moral notions of how society should function. There is certainly some truth in this, but generally the Ruskinian ideas of a moral economy which have had such an influence on labour rhetoric in its history have not been reflected in its economic policy. Labour's more pressing concern was with economic efficiency and social power, as it must be with any party with aspirations to govern. The market economy was denounced as inefficient and compared to the efficient Soviet economy until relatively recent times, while the debates over economic policy were often debates about the location of power over the economy. It was the control of the commanding heights of the economy which was seen as the key to Labour economic policy, and it is this dimension of concern with social power which is absent in New Labour.

Pat Thane's essay, 'Labour and Welfare', is a solid, critical work on Labour's commitment to welfare, pointing out the didactic approach taken to 'idleness', and refusing to accept an idolisation of the NHS. The author expresses a real concern with the shift in attitude to welfare and poverty expressed by New Labour. There is a sudden change when we reach New Labour, who see work as an obligation rather than a right. The radical nature of this shift in labour's approach can be under-estimated by pointing to the puritan didacticism in Labour's past approach to the poor, as this shift involves an acceptance of a society which is marked by under-employment and low wages in a capitalist economy. This is new, marking a basic change from puritan attitudes to poverty which saw the evil effects of indigence as disappearing with the advent of a co-operative commonwealth. The reason for this sharp discontinuity is the significant lacuna in an otherwise effective and powerful essay.

Stephen Howe's essay, 'Labour and International Affairs', traces the tension between Labour's ethical approach to the world and realpolitik. This internationalist ethic involved utopian posturing; the peaceful resolution of disputes; anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism (now out of fashion); and a universalist approach to exploitation and human rights. This dualism is hardly original, and the reason for the realpolitik's being so impervious to Labour's ethic is not elaborated. Nevertheless, his sympathetic charting of Labour's shifting attitude to colonial independence sits uneasily with the disturbing tendency which has gained such ground in recent years to accept Labour's endorsement of the horrors of the Vietnam War. The glowing assertion that moral internationalism and radical change are now enshrined in government fits nicely with the other essays, but the author does not try to explain why Labour failed to develop an internationalist ethic different from the traditional Liberal approach to foreign policy, or the possibility that that ethic had become an empty rhetoric as a result of the abandonment of the free trade doctrine on which Liberal foreign policy rested.

Martin Francis, in his essay 'Labour and Gender' is also non-controversial. The author bases himself on the safe ground that Labour's commitment to a just society encouraged women to make progress through its activities, while its paradoxical commitment to the interests of male manual workers led to great frustrations for women. Nobody would dispute the limited advances in women's representation made in Parliament and conference, which is carefully documented; the representations of masculinity and femininity in Labour are always interesting, and some images are constructed here which carry on the work begun by Bea Campbell.

However, the author's acceptance of feminist ideas blinds him to the self-perceptions of men and women in Labour's past - for most of them women didn't exist as conceptually independent of men, which partly explains their frustrations at union resistance to demands for equal pay and family insurance through much of Labour's history. The changing position of women in society which has allowed the change in demands for representation, the particular forms of careerist advancement which this has often taken, the fundamental social difference between articulate women who enjoy material comforts and those women who do not (with all the dreadful consequences of that stark fact) are absent from this account. Yet, as Pat Thane noted, it is the poorest women who are at the receiving end of Labour's changes to the welfare state and their new commitment to family values; here, they are as neglected as they were at the height of Labour's male-blinkered attitude.

The essay 'Labour and the Constitution' is the type of solid account which we have come to expect of Miles Taylor. His careful study of Labour's approach to constitutional reform shows that periods of radicalism such as that of the early 1930s, when paranoia about bankers and fascists led to vague proposals for emergency executive powers, were brief punctuations in what was generally a very mild approach to change. Sadly, there is too little on contemporary movements for reform, and nothing on the Bennite Left 's approach to the Lords and the Monarchy. A reading of M.J.C. Vile on constitutionalism would also have allowed a distinction to be made between the rules and the spirit or principles of a constitution - the principles of the British Constitution go un-noticed. The author's caution that Labour's present attitude is limited by the fact that the constitution is of its own making (p.173) is a strangely inaccurate addendum to a history which demonstrates Labour's conservative acceptance of Britain's unwritten constitution.

Despite my own lack of political sympathy with the book's aims, I think it has to be recognized that it does try to move away from any simplified hurrah-patriotism, and at their best the essays stand as a genuine mark of the intellectual explorations of a new generation with its own political commitment. However, the book's central theme that Labour's achievements have not prevented the party from spending much of its history in opposition is in itself a measure of how far Labour's intelligentsia has travelled from confidence of the party's fiftieth anniversary. What was once a socialist expectation has become gratitude for a parliamentary majority.

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