

SOCIALIST RENEWAL

New Labour's Aims and Values

A Study in Ambiguity

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When Tony Blair announced that he intended to rewrite the constitution of the Labour Party, characteristically he concealed the meaning of this commitment from his audience, the Labour Party Conference of 1994. It was apparently felt by his advisers that a bold statement of intent might diminish his standing ovation. Indeed, the conference went on to confirm this apprehension immediately after, when it reaffirmed its commitment to the original wording of Clause IV of that Constitution, with its celebration of common ownership.

Very soon it became plain that the Labour leader was seeking something much more thoroughgoing than a 'modernisation' of socialist thinking. He saw all criticisms of capitalism as antique prejudice, and was determined to revamp the Labour Party as a committed proponent of market dynamism, private enterprise, and competitive virtue.

Early in this argument, I published a little book entitled Common Ownership in which all these objectives were criticised. There is no reason to modify what that said. But it was only at the last moment that 'New Labour' entrusted us with the precise wording of its new text, which thus escaped scrutiny, and a lot of criticism.

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The Labour Party's new Statement of Aims and Values, devised to replace the explicitly socialist commitment in the Party's Constitution, Clause IV, has been much criticised. It has been found wanting because it is prolix, because its sentiments are expressed without any great clarity, and because its sentences are

badly structured. But its greatest fault lies in its content, and in the 'project' which it seeks to serve.

The peculiar grammar of the Labour Leader's office is a noteworthy feature of the modern political regime. On official occasions, a sententious style is required, in which sentences flower into innumerable sub-clauses, seemingly without end. But for speeches aimed through conferences at the mass media, the style has to be different: it consists of a necklace of soundbites, sentences without verbs, quick hints which have been crafted to seem to imply an actual idea, but are never sustained for long enough to state one. Both styles share one resolute commitment: ambiguity is the soul of political expression.

Today's leadership either pontificates or gibbers.

The style of the new Clause IV falls squarely within the pontifical category. This is what it says:

IV: LABOUR'S AIMS AND VALUES

1. The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour, we achieve more than we achieve alone so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few, where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe, and where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.
2. To these ends we work for:
 - a dynamic economy, serving the public interest, in which the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition are joined with the forces of partnership and co-operation to produce the wealth the nation needs and the opportunity for all to work and prosper, with a thriving private sector and high quality public services, where those undertakings essential to the common good are either owned by the public or accountable to them;
 - a just society, which judges its strength by the condition of the weak as much as the strong, provides security against fear, and justice at work; which nurtures families, promotes equality of opportunity and delivers people from the tyranny of poverty, prejudice and the abuse of power;
 - an open democracy, in which government is held to account by the

people; decisions are taken as far as practicable by the communities they affect; and where fundamental human rights are guaranteed;

■ a healthy environment, which we protect, enhance and hold in trust for future generations.

3. Labour is committed to the defence and security of the British people, and to co-operating in European institutions, the United Nations, the Commonwealth and other international bodies to secure peace, freedom, democracy, economic security and environmental protection for all.
4. Labour will work in pursuit of these aims with trade unions, co-operative societies and other affiliated organisations, and also with voluntary organisations, consumer groups and other representative bodies.
5. On the basis of these principles, Labour seeks the trust of the people to govern.

The first sentence of the new aims is uncharacteristic in that it is short, clear, and might even carry a meaning. “The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party.” Had the draftsmen stopped at this point, their work would have been better done. But they did not. They went on to provide non-definitions of what a democratic socialist party might be, piling one confusion on another. Let us try to sort some of them out.

“It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour, we achieve more than we achieve alone . . .” This would have been a good and coherent sentence, but for the fact that it has been continued at four times its initial length to include a whole portmanteau of other commitments, or more usually, hints of commitments. This thought contains deliberate echoes of old trade union slogans. “All for one and one for all” is a recognition of the strength of collective action. However, here the package which surrounds it serves not only to sanitise the language, removing any evocation of conflict, but also to modify the behaviour of those who respond.

Collective action can take a multitude of forms. It can be spontaneous, expressing the impulse of a crowd, the anger of a mob, the commitment of a meeting. Or it can be continuous,

building itself into a permanent movement. Collective bargaining, for instance, continually regenerates the idea of collective action with every bargain that is struck. The members of a trade union see their collectivity as a direct fact whenever they band together to formulate and present a claim: but they also see it reinforced as it is reflected in the eyes of their employers, every time that those employers enter into negotiations and reach an agreement. We know, when we gain the wage increase, or the reduction in working time, that we have achieved this together, and that the employer has conceded it in large measure because we were combined within a collective organisation.

Is this, then, the meaning of the new first paragraph of Labour's Aims and Values? Not exactly. The inelegantly long sentence which meanders on from this good beginning is aimed at least as much at qualifying the collectivist motif, as it is at reinforcing it. To begin with, we have a new sub-clause, emphasising the contribution of this collective to personal development. At one level this states a truism. All of this activity is "to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential". This is a traditional continuation of the collectivist argument, and it was very incisively expressed in the Communist Manifesto, which aimed at a society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all".

But the next notion which is evoked in this breathless utterance invites us to "a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few". It was reported that this sentiment was added after a heated argument in the National Executive Committee of the Party. Be that as it may, it is a contradictory commitment. What would happen if "opportunity" were in the hands of the "many"? In the normal rhetoric of the New Labour leadership, opportunity is strictly personal. It consists of individual access to desirable occupations of one kind or another. Hiding in this ambiguity is the problem

of whether children should have access to the superior school of their parents' choice, or whether the entire school system should afford opportunities to all to learn. Does one such commitment conflict with the other? Old Labour thought that often it did. Old Labour was also aware of another problem. Do we mean that opportunity itself will be "equal"? And where does an "equal" start begin? Are we speaking only of a career open to the talents? Or are we seeking equality in the treatment of people with different talents?

Alternatively, do we mean that the actual *allocation* of opportunities will be undertaken "by the many, not the few"? But centuries of struggle for democracy have shown us how difficult it is to put such powers of appointment into the hands of the many rather than the few. Revolutions have commonly transferred power from one few to another few, often without much sensitivity to the needs of most.

From time to time we have had somewhat greater success in redistributing wealth, but this has required the use of mechanisms such as the taxation system, which are not fashionable amongst those who drafted this document. In a word, this cluster of objectives has been designed to evoke memories of an egalitarian spirit, without actually encouraging vulgar hopes for egalitarian behaviour. Is this the tribute which vice pays to virtue?

Even at this point, we have not reached the end of the sentence. The promised nirvana, we are next told, will be "where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe . . ." There is much fondness on the right for a ritual celebration of the idea of duty. To be sure, all the collective organisations of Labour acknowledge a range of duties. It is my duty to pay my trade union subscription. If I do not do this, sanctions may be taken against me, in that I will be "out of benefit". But for the committed trade unionist, it is not the sanctions which intimidate him: it is the felt duty which drives him. To be out of benefit is

more of a disgrace than a punishment. By the same token, a committed trade unionist will not agree to break a strike.

From this network of long-recognised duties can be deduced the need for the restoration of the necessary body of law to enable trade unions to live out the normal ethos of their collectivism. But although this would be a good idea, it is not the idea which is driving the authors of this statement. There is above all an abstract duty, which will fall upon the poor, and motivate the subordinate part of society. Thrift, abstemiousness, hard work, and respect for property and authority are virtues which seem likely to be promoted. Beggars, squeegee windscreen washers and graffiti artists, by contrast, will not. All this might be thought convenient to the super-ordinate part of society, because the rich and powerful find their task of ordering affairs very much simpler when their minions have a very high sense of these kinds of duty, and a rather low appreciation of their rights.

The more integrated and equal a society is, the more truly it will match rights and duties, and the less obtrusive both will be. An equal society would have internalised both, so that both the assertion and the enforcement of claims would be an ethical reflex, not at all a problem for compulsion. Unequal societies generate the need for compulsion, not only because rights will be denied if they are not justiciable, but also because duties will not be spontaneously felt, and therefore not spontaneously observed, where rights are normally skimped and withheld. If the attainment of my rights can only be achieved through the Courts, I am hardly likely to show much enthusiasm for the observance of duty.

A pluralistic society will generate concentric and overlapping circles of mutual obligation, so that rights and duties will be established at different levels, with different degrees of commitment. But my rights in the sports club, and my duties in the choir or the allotment society will find their respective

balances in the broadly egalitarian culture that is generated in such associations. The balance is completely different when we leave voluntary associations behind, and confront the problems which are generated by social class. Class division undermines common understanding, corrodes rights, and rots duties. Society often struggles to repair these damaging conditions by the use of force. But the more that force is used, the more will it be needed.

How can duties reflect rights? Under what conditions can such a reflection happen? In the modern world, we shall not arrive at such a social balance until the gross inequalities in property ownership are removed. The major decisions in the modern economy are taken by the merest handful of propertied persons, and reflect the interests of these persons rather than any sense of "duty". Indeed, the juridical structure of modern industry lays it down that the duty of the directors of a company is to protect the propertied interests which they represent. There are no equivalent "duties" to protect the interests of labour, or the community, or the natural environment.

Does New Labour intend to bell this cat? Are we about to see the necessary transformation of company law? Then we might indeed see the expansion of rights which is needed for a more harmonious reflection of rights by duties. But if this does not happen, then what we have is only empty rhetoric. And the well-meaning final clause in paragraph one, which enjoins a "spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect" will also remain rhetoric.

The terrible truth is that the evolution of capitalism has returned us to the point at which mass unemployment is a structural fact of modern economic life. The ultimate class division finds a handful of entrepreneurs, distributing unprecedented treasures, while masses live on the edge of privation. "Solidarity" is very difficult in such circumstances. Every trade union member knows that the fear of unemployment

tames the trade union spirit. Half of the eighty million hours of overtime worked each week in Britain are now unpaid. This shows a punishing retreat of solidarity, firstly because although labour *should* be paid, and would be paid if workers were free to defend their reasonable rights, those rights are unenforceable in the current regime: and secondly because eighty million hours of overtime each week would amount, under the rule of solidarity, to two million additional jobs in the economy.

But what then, of tolerance and respect? Mass unemployment does wonders for xenophobia and the extreme right. Authoritarian sentiments are reinforced by high levels of frustration, and disoriented discontent. There is always a rational kernel, even to the most outlandish and irrational popular sentiment. It is the easiest thing in the world to find a scapegoat for unemployment, blaming immigrants, or ethnic groups, or simply people who are different. The notion that this or the other minority has stolen my job has a long and disgraceful history which is all the more insidious for being recurrent.

A “spirit of tolerance and respect” merits support: but how can it prevail in a culture of mass unemployment, dispossession, and exclusion? If we are proclaiming abstract goods, then, why do we not proclaim the right to work? Is it perhaps easier to argue for tolerance, and, when tolerance proves difficult to obtain, to chide transgressors for possessing an inadequate sense of duty?

The second paragraph consists of an even longer sentence than the first. Summarising, it promises to work for a dynamic economy, a just society, an open democracy, and a healthy environment. Each of these is then qualified in language which is calculated to evoke the warmth of traditional labour values, whilst carefully removing any vestige of a real threat to the power of those who operate the capitalist system. This requires continual recourse to even more deliberate ambiguity. Let us examine this concoction.

The “dynamic economy” which is sought will serve the public interest, by joining “the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition . . . with the forces of partnership and co-operation”. This will “produce the wealth the nation needs and the opportunity for all to work and prosper”. Very clearly the lyrical passage about enterprise and competitive rigour is aimed at a particular class of New Labour supporters, one that includes Mr Rupert Murdoch.

In fact, the market may in certain circumstances generate enterprise, if it is not already dominated and manipulated by one or more predominant corporations. How can particular companies come to rig the market? Through single-minded application of the “rigour of competition”, of course. This rigour generates concentration of resources, in which some companies win and others lose. Not simply does competition commonly lead to monopoly: modern forms of enterprise tend to rigidify relations between core companies and greater or lesser numbers of clients occupying closely controlled spaces, in either supply of components or distribution of products. How does this kind of juggernaut submit to “joining” with the forces of partnership and co-operation?

The Labour leader has established a cosy relationship with Mr Murdoch. Does this prefigure a new birth of partnership and co-operation in the fiefdoms of the great press mogul? Hardly. If this clause celebrates any “partnership”, it is that between the leaders of New Labour and those representatives of capital who believe that their interests might be served by a change of government. “Partnership” with their employees does not form part of their agenda. “Co-operation”, on the other hand, is always available, provided only that underlings do exactly what they are told.

Let us step back from this empty ideological blather, and examine what the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition have really done to the British economy.

First of all, they have demolished a large part of that economy, shifting some elements of production to other global regions, and substituting some basic products by cheaper alternatives.

But these shifts in economic organisation, even if they reflect a certain dynamism, have laid waste large parts of our social structure. Unemployment has reached unprecedented postwar levels, with the official figures registering 2.3 million claimants, and the actual numbers exceeding official counts by one million or more. This unemployment is structural. That is to say, it will not respond to the expedients which are devised in order to meet and ameliorate the trade cycle. In fact, from one trough of that cycle to another, and from that trough to the next, unemployment figures have risen steadily. A whole generation of young men are now excluded, for all practical purposes, from productive jobs. Does this "serve the public interest"? Of course not: but it does express the logic of the modern capitalist economy, and it does require significant governmental responses (dare we say, socialist responses), if the problem is to be treated. Could we treat it by joining "the forces of partnership and co-operation" to the problem? Possibly: but then it would be necessary to arm those forces intellectually, to generate appropriate programmes of action for them, to help them identify themselves and agree responsible goals. Is it necessary to say that New Labour is doing nothing about these matters, because to make even the slightest move in that direction would be to undo the intended soporific effect of this deliberate ambiguity? Mr Murdoch will not enrol his newspapers in a campaign to restore full employment, although he may allow a certain space to lament the misfortune which unemployment brings.

All this is clear in the following clauses. In producing the wealth that the nation needs, it is envisaged that all will secure "the opportunity . . . to work and prosper". But it is enterprise and market dynamism which have confiscated the right to work and prosper from over three million people, and impoverished

their dependents. Some would argue that this process has encouraged “a thriving private sector”, in the vast extension of a black economy which has sprung up as a spontaneous answer to misery. Beyond doubt it has also drawn vast quantities of blood from our impoverished public services.

The Labour Party has, during its long history, given rise to a variety of meaningless and contradictory utterances, but this is a prime specimen, unsurpassed in doublespeak. Oh, George Orwell, where are you in our time of need?

This first prolix clause in the second indent of the new text then features another of the amendments of the well-meaning majority of Labour’s National Executive Committee, insisting that “those undertakings essential to the common good are either owned by the public or accountable to them”. But which undertakings have earned a place on this list? And what might be the criteria for inclusion? A very large number of solidly private companies are involved in activities “essential to the common good”. Few are owned by the public, and the degree of their accountability remains a matter of heated contention. Sometimes matters go worse than that. Arms manufacture and sales, for instance, frequently involve activities which contribute to the common harm. But the armaments industry is apparently able to shape government policy at will, and override it where necessary. In this powerful sector sleaze and corruption are all around, but they only become worthy of notice by statesmen when members of a different political party are found to be engaged in them. Yet these and how many other private producers regularly trespass against the common good?

Economic management, however, ranges far beyond the frontiers of private and public sectors. The fact is that national governments have largely lost effective control over economic direction, so that democracy has become a practice with diminishing returns. To reopen democratic possibilities, close co-operation is required between several national governments,

or federal entities representing their peoples. A degree of democracy could certainly be restored at the European level, if the European institutions were reshaped in a manner conducive to meeting this end. There could be a programme of controls rendering undertakings effectively accountable over a wide range of their activities.

Already we have seen harmonisation of some of the consumer protections which are necessary in the European single market. There can be social and environmental harmonisation, too, once the destructive opt-outs have been removed from Britain's relations with the European Union. But effectively to democratise economic policy requires a degree of federal intervention, stimulating appropriate forms of investment in the real economy, in the educational infrastructure and in the concerted reduction of working time. Without such combined intervention, unemployment will actually continue to grow, and the dynamic economy will actually increase it. Capitalism has at present no mechanism for translating growth into new employment. New Labour recognises this at national level, and abjures any attempt to recreate one by increasing taxes. But it has not risen to the challenge of Jacques Delors, to replace national by Federal instruments. A democratic socialist party risks its very existence if it supinely accepts this block as a fact of modern life, and withdraws from the struggle to overturn it.

It is in this context that we must evaluate the next commitment, to a just society. Once again, we have a *bien pensant* proclamation, announcing the intention to judge "by the condition of the weak as much as the strong". But this implies that a just society is only about the *evaluation* of inequalities. It is not. It is about *their abolition*: the establishment of conditions which are just. A just society therefore does not include weak and strong, and a society is only just in so far as it has overcome this division. There could not be a more telling admission of the conservative basis of this

New Labour philosophy than is revealed in this equivocation. Such supine conformity is the badge of slavery.

The same conservatism erupts with a pledge to provide security against fear. Is it not our objective to remove the *causes* of fear? Mass unemployment promotes the car-boot culture, the rawest and most carnivorous competition for survival, worthy of Mrs Thatcher herself, and a host of subcriminal hangers-on, whose activities do indeed terrorise their neighbours. The drug culture also generates fear as well as misery. Have these phenomena no causes, no remedies? There is only one remedy which has ever suggested itself in the writings of the New Labour leadership: its name is condign punishment. The same applies to the commitment to “justice at work”. What justice, where? With 12, 20 or 300 possible applicants for each new job, from whence does justice spring? Trade unions can sometimes find the internal force to insist upon it. More normally they are hanging on to the loyalty of their members by their fingernails. Does justice spring, fully armed, from the large brain of Mr Rupert Murdoch? It might be wise to maintain some agnosticism about this presumption.

And then, what is left to “nurture families”, “promote equality of opportunities”, still less “deliver people from the tyranny of poverty”? All these are amiable objectives, but none of them will be realised by any single measure or combination of measures to which those who produced this text would commit themselves. This very text is, indeed, arguably itself a part of “the abuse of power” against which it inveighs.

How then, can we interpret the commitment to an open democracy? It would be a good idea. So would “a healthy environment”. The new Clause IV culminates with a promise of international co-operation, and of collaboration with trade unions, co-operatives and voluntary organisations. Its last, and most fervid hope is that, on the basis of this elaborate confusion, Labour may “obtain the trust of the people to govern”. If this

had been an honest commitment, it would have sought the trust and the active help of the people to initiate significant change, to move in the direction of a more just society, a more open democracy, and all the other positive commitments to which it has alluded in this statement of aims and values. A genuine campaign for renewal would involve the coming together of large numbers of people, the arousal of a popular crusade for change. Such a campaign is still within the reach of the Labour Party. How will it be catalysed? It might be “led”, or “inspired”, or even “provoked”. Whatever its source, it would constitute a great mobilisation, or better, self-mobilisation, of men and women, and their voluntary organisations. No such risky activity is promoted here. New Labour will do it all, even though no-one knows quite what it will be.

That is why the choice of the word “govern” is extremely revealing. That is what New Labour seeks to do, and it will sell its grandmother in bite-sized grandmaburgers, if this is necessary to prove its commitment to its project which is the enterprise of the market, and the desirability of office.

Socialists will need to aim higher than this, if the very ideas of justice and democracy are to remain alive in the lexicons of future generations.

A renewed and relevant modern socialism will retain a number of beliefs with which socialists have lived for more than a century.

Firstly, there will be no freedom for the vast majority to develop to the limits of their capacities while ownership of industrial property is concentrated in a few hands, and while access is restricted by powers external to democracy.

Secondly, the market, far from helping to redistribute economic and political power, actually strengthens and reproduces it. Continuous action is therefore necessary to reverse these effects.

Thirdly, social equality and justice still depend very much on the active redistribution of wealth and power.

Fourthly, in modern times, there are many circumstances in which economic growth does not create employment. Therefore the natural workings of the market are unable to meet the basic needs of social cohesion.

Fifthly, social education has a primary duty to strengthen those who have been disadvantaged, and to overcome growing social exclusion. In modern terms this involves encouraging and fostering the role of trade unions and other voluntary organisations.

And sixthly, it is no proper function of modern socialists to seek to maintain a “balance” between private and public sectors. Humane social policy demands the actual strengthening of the public domain.

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