

# The Next Left - Life After the Labour Party

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*He who fights too long against dragons becomes a dragon himself:  
and if thou gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss will gaze into thee.  
Friedrich von Nietzsche, quoted in George Orwell, 'As I  
Please', September 8th 1944.*

The Labour Party to put it mildly is in crisis. It does not know what it stands for, who it represents or what vision of society it has. Many now pore opprobrium onto the shoulders of Gordon Brown, while others blame “the legacy” of Tony Blair, or the actions of uber-Blairite outriders.

Sadly, for all concerned Labour's travails go much deeper than Brownite and Blairite factionalism, and touch the core of what a modern 'centre-left' party is about. It is no accident that Labour's problems and the end of New Labour has coincided with similar problems of leadership, identity and electoral appeal for the German SPD and French Socialists (PS). This is because changes in society, and the prognosis offered by mainstream centre-left parties has in these last two decades proven so inadequate.

This essay, written as Labour gathers in a mood of depression at Manchester for its Annual Conference, attempts to put Labour's problems into a longer-term perspective. It looks at the arc of Labour's experience post-war and draws on the possible futures post-Blair to assess where we are now. It will look at the nature of social class change in the UK and the current crisis in the financial markets to assess where Labour and the centre-left should go now and use the writings of Michael Young and George Orwell to understand where we are and what future directions we might take.

## **After the New Labour Decade**

New Labour's decade of dominance was a strange, disorientating affair: an unprecedented three electoral victories, at the cost of ideological retreat, accommodating and ultimately consolidating Thatcherism. Last year as the New Labour decade closed at the fag-end of the Blair premiership, four possible futures availed themselves for Labour (This section draws from my essay, 'After Blair, After Socialism and the Search for a New Story', in (ed.), *After Blair: Politics after the New Labour Decade*, 2007):

- **Business As Usual: The Continuation of the Conservative Century:**

The Blair Government would come to be seen in retrospect as an unique, but transient force. Labour's three election victories would become associated with Blair and less with Labour. The party post-Blair would return to the conventions of British politics, based on asymmetrical Labour and Tory two party politics, with a resultant Conservative ascendancy.

- **A New Progressive Consensus: The Europeanisation of British Politics:**

Labour post-Blair becomes part of a new progressive consensus which includes a return to a progressive Europeanisation, engagement with the EU and other European leaders. This was part of the original inspiration for 'the project' and would entail getting serious about Labour-Lib Dem co-operation. To gain impetus at Westminster, this will require PR and can only realistically come about if Labour loses its majority in the Commons at the next election.

- **Post-Democracy: New Labour as a 'Court Party':**

New Labour's embrace of post-democratic elites and corporate class continues after Blair. Political parties continue hollowing out, with memberships reduced in numbers and in role to cheerleaders. Political power continues flowing from traditional party politics and into other arenas: from business to NGOs and other non-state players. All the main parties collude in this process of affirming the orthodoxies of post-democracy which lead to disillusionment and disengagement amongst voters. This would be Labour as a component of the new 'political class' [0] whose ascendancy has been proclaimed by Peter Osborne.

- **Labour Breakdown: The Australianisation of British Labour**

Labour after being in power for a decade is reduced to a state of exhaustion and demoralisation. The crunch point arrives when the party loses its reputation for economic competence and a weakened, disorientated party is replaced by a new centre-right ascendancy. With few resources left, the party faces more than just a long Australian style period in opposition or even a repeat of its eighteen years of opposition from 1979-97. For if the national parties in Scotland and Wales replace its twentieth century bastions in Scotland and Wales, to which it retrenched and from which it renewed itself after 1979 it will never be able to claim its previous hegemony from England alone.

Fifteen months after the exit of Blair and arrival of Brown as Prime Minister, any hopes that Brown could find the ground for a new progressive consensus sensitive to traditional Labour values, while advancing a 'new politics' agenda on constitutional reform and democracy, seem nothing short of delusional.

Nothing in Brown's past beyond the occasional positioning and rhetoric in the odd conference speech gave any real hope of such an approach from him. All his actions pointed before he took over towards what we have in fact had with Brown the premier: an unattractive mix of Labour tribalism and centralisation with Thatcherism consolidated.

After a year plus of Brown Labour's possible futures have therefore been reduced to:

- **Business as Usual: The Continuation of the Conservative Century**
- **Post-Democracy: New Labour as a 'Court Party'**
- **Labour Breakdown: The Australianisation of British Labour**

It is not clear which of these is most likely. Indeed each of the three futures above is not mutually exclusive. The politics of Britain post-Blair have shown the entrenchment of the political classes to post-democracy, while the Conservatives popularity signals the revival of Tory dominance which characterised most of the last century. From this perspective, the best Labour can hope is to be thrown from office and to revive its fortunes as the Cameron Conservatives fade and a new Labour leader emerges committed to the global order and not offering anything other than symbolic change. This is what Kevin Rudd has achieved in Australia ending eleven years of rule by defeating John Howard in 2007.

### **The Long Revolution and the Rise of the 'New Class'**

It may seem too pessimistic to dismiss the possibility of Labour embracing a democratic Europeanisation. But its present dire situation is not just the outcome of an error of leadership. However lively and pointed some of the external criticisms may be (some of which have found expression in the OurKingdom's 'Labour After Brown' debate) there is little sign of any coherent internal reckoning. The main opposition to Brown comes from those who want a better Blair - whose poisoned mantle appears to be wrapped around David Miliband.

The leading parliamentary figure of the Compass group, Jon Cruddas, MP, is attempting to develop a coherent left position within the most difficult circumstances, but will not stand against Brown, has organised pre-conference a 'loyalty statement' to the leadership, and supported extending detention without charge to 42 Days. It is not the tactical issues that matter here, it is the total absence from the parliamentary party of any credible alternative that shows that New Labour has been, to borrow a phrase, a process not an event. An ongoing process: through a whole variety of methods, not least the manipulation of candidate selection, the official Labour party is now a product of the society it has celebrated unable even at its own conferences to vote on, let alone alter, the policies it espouses. It has become the party of the 'new class' its leading post-war writers warned against.

British society has changed dramatically over the post-war era, and along with it the political environment and contours of what is possible. One of the most pertinent critiques of society can be found in Michael Young's 'The Rise of the Meritocracy' published in 1958. It is part satire, part about the future, part about social trends, part an indictment of what he saw as coming about in 1950s Britain, and has relevance to the state of the nation today.

Setting his story in a Britain of 2033, he postulates a non-controversial analysis from the 1870s onward - his starting point because it marks the introduction of compulsory schooling in England and competitive entry into the civil service. The book in his own words is 'a warning ... against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt against the meritocracy in 2033.' (see Young, 'Down with Meritocracy', The Guardian, June 29th 2001).

What Young paints is a future society which slowly transforms itself from one where status is ascribed by birth to one where it is based on concepts of 'ability' and 'talent'. Most contemporary politicians and influencers see this world as a major advance and widening of opportunity.

However, Young sees things differently. 'A social revolution' has been achieved by 'sieving people according to education's narrow band of values' and a 'new class' created which has the means to reproduce itself. This 'new class' defines and creates itself by the attributes of 'ability' and 'talent'; which shape the way 'intelligence' is understood. This allows this class to see their position in

society and their individual lifestories as a validation of their personal characteristics; it sees the experience of those outwith this class as a symptom of their personal weakness, lacking and failure.

In Young's future Britain the differences between the parties are minimal, and the Labour Party does not exist in the sense people used to understand it. It has become a vehicle of social advancement for the 'new class'. Status and power is highly stratified and access to education and accreditation determines access to the 'new class'. An ideology of testing is everywhere.

Michael Young was not the only writer to worry about the consequences of the emergence of a 'new class'. George Orwell's bleak, dystopian 'Nineteen Eight-Four' is shaped by its author's concern about this. In the world of 'Big Brother' and 'Airstrip One', there are three classes: the Inner Party, the Outer Party and the Proles. Entry to these three classes is gained by selection at an early age according to a battery of different tests, rather than family heritage. The Inner Party is not an aristocratic or hereditary class, but in Orwell's words 'the master brain' of the system whose primary motivation is to 'keep themselves in power'. This sounds rather like the characteristics of our current political class (Orwell, 1949).

Young wrote the 1945 Labour election manifesto, invented the word 'meritocracy' and saw it as an unattractive, stifling concept. Instead, the political classes who have followed from the 1960s onward have appropriated and misunderstood the term. From Wilson's children through to Thatcher's children, as with Blair's children in the near-future, British society has ossified and stratified, as our political leaders have faced in the exact opposite language: preaching a language of opportunity and equality.

In Young's and Orwell's stories, power and influence coalesces around 'the new class'. This situation has come to pass in contemporary Britain with the main political parties, business and institutional opinion, operating in a way which reinforces the power and privilege of the 'new class'. Many of the debates which look as if they are informed by other groups: about social inclusion, youth crime, binge drinking, and disadvantaged communities, are actually informed by the interests of the new class, and about their anxieties about crime, disorder and delinquency.

### **The Current Economic Crisis and the Demise of 'the New Conservatives'**

Where does this leave the prospect for a successful, radical left? First, it is clear that what has happened in the last few weeks in global financial markets points to something significant of the scale of 1929 and 1973. This is the end of the Thatcherite/Reaganite era and the Anglo-American model of financial capitalism.

The age of deregulation, corporate power and big government for big business is hopefully drawing to a close. George W. Bush's disastrous presidency has massively extended US state spending and the size of the government deficit, aided by fighting two wars it is losing simultaneously. The latest American interventions can be seen as the continuation of corporate welfare or the beginning of a new chapter. Certainly the scale of intervention with the US taxpayer financing up to \$1 trillion of toxic debts from banks, along with the nationalisation of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, point to the latter.

However, the Anglo-American political class, whether 'left' or 'right', have shown how little they understand events. This is not surprising - for across Labour, Tories, Democrats and Republicans there has been a retreat in understanding political economy and how markets do and don't work, and

in its place a Panglossian upbeat view of globalisation which politicians could get away with in the nineties, but cannot now.

This is an historic opportunity for a new interventionist centre-left and a different kind of capitalism: one less turbo-charged and shaped by finance capital, and more regulated and managed. This is the moment to intervene to create a new infrastructure of banking and finance in the UK: new public banks, new mechanisms for securitising debt and public insurance of securitised assets, along with a new attitude to regulation. This moment cannot be seized without a new left arising which breaks with the accommodation to laissez-faire capitalism of 'the new conservatives' of the 'near-left': Blair and Brown et al.

Gordon Brown and New Labour are incapable after over a decade of globalisation mantras of effortlessly switching into a 'new world equals new solutions' as he attempted at the opening of Labour conference. Barack Obama, the Democratic Presidential hopeful has more opportunity given he is untainted by the politics and economics of the last decade, but so far has yet to say anything noteworthy.

Second, this has to be seen in the context of what our society and politics have evolved into and the wider issues of an 'Anglo-American' imagined sphere which our political classes have aided and abetted. To fundamentally address the inequities and challenges of the way banking, finance and markets have been allowed to act we need to address the inter-connected issues of power and privilege associated with the emergence of 'the new class' outlined by Young and Orwell. This will involve a wholesale transformation of how we think of society, of education, the central role of testing in measuring intelligence, and indeed how we construct 'ability' and 'talent'.

### **Step Forward, the Next Left**

This moment is the opportunity for a next left to arise which breaks with the accommodations and appeasements of the 'near-left' of Blair, Brown and Clinton which sided up to the most powerful vested interests in the planet, while lecturing the rest of us about 'hard choices'.

The next left has to learn from the mistakes of previous lefts, while still drawing from the best in its tradition. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the mistakes and limitations present in socialism, social democracy and progressivism, while not throwing out that which was best in the left tradition.

We will need to affirm with less qualification a politics of equality, liberty and fraternity, with an understanding of the limits of economic growth, the importance of well-being and environmentalism, and a new interventionist state. Given we know the hubris fundamental to the concept of socialism, the dilution and retreat in social democracy, and the vagueness inherent in progressivism, the next left needs a new philosophy, purpose and boldness.

Part of this will involve returning to some of the classic texts: Marx, Keynes, Galbraith, some by writing the as yet unwritten texts of the new age. For the British left after three decades of unfettered capitalism and retreat by those in Labour, Liberal Democrats and other centre-left forces, a good initial step to understanding where we are would be to revisit Michael Young's classic.

Young's book certainly offers more words of wisdom than the simplistic soundbite texts such as 'Blink' and 'Nudge' - which in the age of 'new conservatism' and post-democracy have kept the centre-left spellbound. Their era is now over; it has in the process damaged and diluted much of

what many of us hold dear, such as notions of 'the public good', along with the selling off of many public goods and the construction of an atomised, hyper-consumerist notion of 'self' based on personal neo-liberalism. The masters of the universe have been humbled; it is up to us to seize the agenda and create the next left.

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