

Labour's blind parochialism

The inward-looking nature of the Labour leadership contest is indicative of a fatal neglect of internationalism and the European project

BY ROGER LIDDLE

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From a Policy Network point of view, it is disappointing – but perhaps no surprise – that the Labour leadership campaign has proceeded with minimal reference to Europe and the wider world. Despite the globalisation of economics, business and culture, the Labour party remains largely a “closed shop”, confined to its national boundaries. It possesses many characteristics of an enclosed order of true believers (of which I count myself), trusting to lead only those who have risen through a narrow hierarchy of talent, immersed in the righteousness of their sect’s values. Consequentially, the party remains unable to link global developments with their impact on the lives of British citizens.

Cynics will observe two contradictory statements here: a political party that doesn’t think first of the concerns of those whose support it must attract to win power, and a lack of meaningful international debate in Labour’s campaign. Since when have voters been interested in international affairs? With respect this is an antiquated Foreign Office view, resulting in Labour manifesting a provincial understanding of its own dilemmas as a political party.

Labour performed badly in the 2010 general election: in share of the vote, its second worst result since the 1920s. Explanations have focused on Labour’s own faults: dysfunctionality amongst its leaders, the consequences of its love affair with neoliberalism and neglect of inequality. Despite expressing several truths, this analysis is fundamentally parochial.

Why did the SPD fall to a catastrophic 23% in Germany’s federal election of 2009? Why are the social democrats and their allies trailing the centre right government as Sweden votes this weekend, suggesting that in the high temple of European social democracy conservatism will win an unprecedented second mandate? Why are there only three social democratic prime ministers in today’s 27 strong European Council?

New Labour undoubtedly got a lot wrong – but so have the vast majority of European centre left parties. This cannot be a coincidence. Huge structural factors surely underpin social democracy’s weakening. British social democrats need to understand them, instead of following meaningless nostrums like “Labour is bound to lose if it moves a millimetre away from New Labour”. The hypothesis that the social democratic constituency is “fundamentally broken” informs Policy Network’s programme on the future of European social democracy, conducted in cooperation with Dutch Labour’s Wiardi Beckman

Institute. We aim to examine why and provide future direction.

Although the majority of Labour Party members are now instinctively pro-European, we have yet to incorporate the EU's reality into our politics. Which of the leadership candidates has presented a positive programme for the EU, not as an optional add-on, but as a central part of their political mission?

The reason is that voters – and particularly many newspapers who mediate our communication with the public – are euro-sceptic. We therefore fail to convey the enormous significance of our EU membership; for example that the UK economy is wholly integrated into the Single Market, and that any growth policy for Britain will only work properly alongside a simultaneous process in the eurozone. The realisation of a new “moral” economy for Britain can only be attained via tighter financial regulation at EU level, the latter equally essential to facilitate raising domestic taxation to fund our welfare state, without provoking a flight of companies overseas. If we are serious about managing migration, the weakening of “push” factors via promoting growth in the EU's poorest regions is essential, as is the enforcement of migration controls at the EU common border.

Fatally, we still play politics as a national game. By exaggerating what nation states can do, and underplaying the EU's crucial role, we ultimately do political debate, and our own electoral prospects, a great disservice. Labour both takes flak for being pro-Europe from popular euro-scepticism, and fails to demonstrate how a positive EU social democratic policy can actively benefit Britain.

This article has so far ignored Iraq: the “international” issue which has intruded into the Labour leadership debate. Beyond tactical manoeuvring, where do the candidates stand on the central issue for Britain of “Europe or America”? It is huge vanity – and a vastly unsustainable defence overreach – to believe that Britain can enjoy special influence as an equal partner with the US in future conflicts. This is not an anti-American point: it is an observation regarding Britain's geopolitical position.

The Foreign Office has fallen head over heels for its new Foreign Secretary, William Hague: “the best since Douglas Hurd” in the arrogance of one former grandee. But Hague fundamentally offers a narrowed vision of Britain's interests, with issues like human rights, climate change and development downplayed, alongside a “circles of influence” conception of its world role outdated even when Churchill coined the phrase. There is an alternative. Presently the EU is a pathetically ineffective “force for good” in the world: the challenge is to make that ambition reality. There's a bold social democratic project for Europe which could have graced the debates of the Labour leadership campaign.

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