

Labour's lost past endangers its future

di Tony Blair

King's College London 120 years of the Labour Party

I thought hard about taking stock on the Labour Party's 120th anniversary. It's not as if my advice is particularly welcome to today's Party. But then it occurred to me that there are only two people born in the last 120 years who have actually won an election for Labour. And alas Harold Wilson is long gone.

As for the other two Labour Leaders to have won an election, Ramsay MacDonald was born in 1866 and Clement Attlee in 1883.

Out of 120 years, Labour has been in power for just over 30 of them. That is a stark statistic.

We now have another Tory Government for 5 years; and possibly for ten. Were that to happen, Labour would have been in office less than a quarter of its existence.

Bluntly, what Labour has stood for in terms of values has been magnificent; its achievements in Government huge; but as a political competitor, it has too often been a failure. It has only once been elected for two successive full terms; only once for three; and both as New Labour, a period much of today's Party wants to disown.

As Glen O'Hara shows in his excellent pamphlet on Labour history published today, during its 120 years, Labour has spent long stretches in opposition, elected spasmodically so the Conservatives could take a breather before the natural order of things resumed i.e. Tory Government.

Labour has always won when it secured the centre of British politics, addressed the future and broadened its appeal; and yet despite this obviously being true, we have exhibited an extraordinary attachment to retreating into a narrow part of the left which has always ended in defeat.

Then, when defeated, we say we will listen to the people, and for a short time we do, before we decide that what they're saying is too uncomfortable and lapse into our comfort zone only to edge with agonised slowness back to where we should have been in the first place.

Our latest defeat was entirely predictable and predicted. We went into an election with a Leader with a minus 40% net approval rating, on political terrain chosen by our opponents, with a manifesto promising the earth but from a planet other than earth, and a campaign which substituted a narcissistic belief in our righteousness for professionalism.

So, here we are, back where we were before. And before that. And before that.

The public is watching the current leadership contest. I know its not the big news. That belongs to Government. Because Governments do things. And Oppositions only say things.

But they have half an ear cocked. They're waiting to see if we get it.

And they're willing us to succeed. They want a strong alternative. They know the country needs an Opposition.

I know that when you run for your Party leadership, you're talking to your activists, you're enthusing your base, you are carefully calibrating the confronting with the consoling.

But we are in crisis.

And at a time when progressive politics is in crisis virtually everywhere.

In countries with populations of over 20m, there is not one traditional left Western Party in majority power and few even in coalition.

Progressives risk confining ourselves within four walls of impotence: old style, tax and spend, State power, economics; foreign policy easily characterised as anti Western; embrace of 'identity' politics; and shouty denunciation of anyone who disagrees. The first misreads the lessons of the financial crisis, the second of post 9/11; the third sees us joining a culture war which we are

absolutely certain to lose; and the fourth encourages us to emulate the right wing populists when our best weapon against them is to be the voice of reason and evidence.

The Labour Party faces challenges peculiar to its own history, magnified by the contemporary ones of its global family.

I can't honestly see any path forward other than fundamental reconstruction.

So, we could debate a myriad of detailed policies on social care, infrastructure, inequality, crime, education, health; North v South and coastal vs cosmopolitan; new campaign techniques and social media. And all of them matter.

But there are three overarching strategic challenges within which the answers to these must be found.

For brevity, I will just summarise them though each requires a book by itself. And none of them will work on their own.

First, we must build a new progressive coalition, to put Labour values into practice.

We must correct the defect from birth, which separated the Liberal reforming traditions of Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes from the Labour ones of Keir Hardie, Attlee, Bevin and Bevan.

These traditions became separated by ideas around class, industrial organisation, the role of the State and individual liberty all of which are time bound; but they had in common social reform, advancement of opportunity and passionate commitment to fighting poverty and injustice all of which are timeless.

How this is done institutionally is for debate. But intellectually and philosophically this is essential. With one qualification. Those Liberal politicians aspired to govern. Today's Lib Dems would have to show the same clarity of purpose.

And remember there are many progressives who presently do not feel at home in either political party.

Secondly, if Labour becomes more moderate and less extreme, of course it will do better. But not much. The problem is that we have defined radical politics by a policy agenda which is hopelessly out of date, with 'moderate' politics being just a milder version of it.

We must redefine what radical means. We're living through a technology revolution which is the 21st C equivalent of the 19th C Industrial Revolution. It will change everything and therefore everything should change including radical reorientation of Government.

This is the context in which we tackle inequality, promote social justice and redistribute power.

And the context for urgent action on Climate. Green politics is no longer single issue politics. It is a new approach to politics altogether. But it needs a reengineering of society and the economy which can't be left to the politics of street protest.

The old labour market isn't coming back. Traditional solutions won't cure regional disparity, low productivity, stagnant wages amongst a section of the population, the communities and people left behind.

We need a re-imagining of the modern economy. But an old fashioned left advocating old ways in a new world, won't be trusted to do it.

Which brings me to the third point: the right ideas in politics never work without the right mentality. I mean the mentality of Government. The Labour Party is not an NGO, and not a pressure group. Its aim is not to trend on twitter, or to have celebrities (temporarily) fawn over it or to glory in a bubble of adulation pricked by the sharp point of the first tough decision.

Our task is to win power and get our hands stuck into the muddy mangle of governing, where out of it can be pulled the prize of progress measured not in fine words spoken at a distance, but in real grounded changes in the wellbeing of the people, some of which they may thank us for and many of which they will never even know were down to our struggle to place self discipline over self indulgence.

Our mission is to take causes and make them practical; to say yes to the ambition and no to over ambition or the wrong ways of realising it.

To go to where the people are and show them how, together, we can do better. To root our actions in their reality. To align their values with ours.

These three changes are profound changes to philosophy, policy and practice.

That is the scale of the remaking. What is going to make the next 120 years different from the first.

That is the big challenge – a mountain bigger than who's the next Leader.

So, I have taken stock. The conclusion after yet another defeat, 120 years from our birth, is not a 'return' to anything.

2020 isn't 1997 or even 2007. And 2030 will be a revolution different from 2020. It's always about the future. Precisely because of that, because whilst pointing forwards, we have been traveling backwards, nothing less than 'born again' head to toe renewal, will do.