Introduction

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At the end of a century in which state socialism has been convincingly beaten to its corner, it might be assumed that a history of the British Labour Party would be a story of failure and ideological compromise. Few historians surveying the evolution of Europe during the twentieth century have stressed the significance of democratic socialist ideas and politics. Rather they identify an age of fascist aggression and Soviet expansion, of wars which left countries devastated and the continent divided. In this story democratic socialist parties frequently appear as the poor relations, without sophisticated ideology or clear purpose – political forces which were largely eclipsed by the extremes.[1] Nor have these parties received much praise for their role in the introduction of social reforms. For many years the most influential texts argued that the growth of collectivist intervention emerged from periods of consensus, from the demands created or unleashed by war, or from the spread of liberal ideologies.[2] Even helpful and original studies saw the reform process as anyway incomplete.[3] To well-regarded left-wing polemicists, the Labour Party was particularly culpable, a pale reflection of its allegedly more sophisticated and dynamic European counterparts.[4] It was attacked by Marxists for its lack of socialist vigour,[5] by Liberals for being class-based,[6] and by feminists for its neglect of

women.[7] Measured against absolute standards or the agendas of others, Labour has inevitably been regularly condemned.

This volume does not hide Labour's weaknesses. However, it does offer a more positive evaluation of the party's record, by judging Labour against its own aims and values, and against what might reasonably have been expected. Whatever its weaknesses, the party has many successes to its credit. It compares very favourably to its rivals. No party was more successful at actually delivering reforms, more feminist, more opposed to imperialism or racism, more able to deliver when given the opportunity. If ideologies are judged by what their advocates achieve, then the contribution of democratic socialism – and of the Labour Party – to the twentieth century stands close comparison to the failure of both the radical left and the conservative right.

This is not to suggest that all socialist parties in Europe have adopted the same mix of ideological aims and immediate policies, or achieved the same degree of success. The British Labour Party is more evidently part of a broader movement than many have suggested,[8] but its history and that of its counterparts elsewhere are not identical. The party has constructed its own electoral constituency, and manufactured its own agenda, in response to specifically national conditions.[9] However, in the following pages, adapting to sober views on the constraints of the immediate context or the means to achieve stated goals is seen not as 'weak' pragmatism, but as a sensible respect for what is possible; not as the consequence of consensus, but as due regard for the balance of political forces at particular moments.

In the real world of politics and economics, parties can achieve only so much through their own actions. Judging a party's performance over a complex, challenging, changing century is no easy matter. What was appropriate before 1914 was inappropriate once peace returned four years later. Labour had to shift from being a fringe party of opposition to a party of government, and also had to contend with global economic collapse, a crisis that served only extremists, as events in mainland Europe testified. During the Second World War, Labour dutifully played its part in running what was effectively a siege economy. A reforming agenda was developed, but had to be stifled.[10] After 1945, the party was forced to concentrate on reconstruction rather than socialist transformation, to recreate an active economy and to generate wealth before it could put any other policies into effect. At national and local levels it had to choose between competing needs, at times sacrificing plans for change to the immediate task of rebuilding the country.[11] More recently, a party rooted in the male trade-union movement and traditional industries has had to

contend with the collapse of the manufacturing economy, the decline of trade unionism and the challenge of feminism. In such circumstances an unchanging ideology and policy would not have denoted consistency, merely atrophy.

In meeting challenges, Labour has faced a series of difficulties. The party has always been dedicated to improving poorer people's living standards – a commitment that in practical terms demanded higher taxation for the better-off and regulated pay increases. It has also tried to improve human behaviour, for example by fighting prejudice. At times, Labour has even stood for issues which the electorate firmly opposed, from the abolition of hanging to the removal of nuclear weapons, because it believed these to be morally right. All this has meant that the battle for electoral support has frequently been arduous.

Labour has on occasion been successful both at 'educating' opinion and introducing reforms despite popular opposition or indifference. But by the end of its periods in office, the party has regularly been faced with electoral unpopularity and internal discord. Persuading people to accept a planned, regulated removal of inequalities has been no easy task. Faced with the alternative promise of unbridled individual freedom, often carefully argued and popularly expressed by the Conservatives in particular,[12] the electorate has regularly voted with its feet. Moreover, some of the party's own activists have been vocal in denouncing 'betrayal'.

More often than not, then, Labour has failed to convince the country as a whole to accept a second dose of its egalitarian medicine. Following its formation as the Labour Representation Committee in February 1900, the party made little headway until after 1918, when the war reduced the Liberal Party to a less effective rival. Even in these improved circumstances, the party could only form two brief minority governments in 1924 and 1929. It was not until 1945, nearly half a century after its formation, that Labour finally achieved an overall majority. Even then it required the special circumstances generated by war to make the party's programme acceptable. Moreover, within six years, the most successful reforming government in twentieth-century British politics was voted out of office. There have been only two subsequent elections in which Labour has achieved a substantial majority – 1966 and 1997. Once elected, even apparently successful Labour governments have been rejected at the polls without achieving a second full term.

Given this legacy of electoral problems and internal divisions, Labour's capacity to implement concrete, lasting reforms is all the more remarkable. As a series of thoughtful biographies have shown, the party

has been led by complex, difficult, but politically shrewd leaders.[13] Its operating principles have been defined and refined by a series of original and practical politician/thinkers, rather than abstract theoreticians.[14] Its policies in office have been constructive and often progressive.[15] Even whilst trying to devise a successful collectivist programme between the wars, the party managed to set the pace in local government and to devise housing and other policies in London and elsewhere which were models of innovation and efficiency.[16] Labour introduced the measures which effectively constructed the welfare state between 1945 and 1951. If some of the ideas came from Liberals such as Beveridge and Keynes, it was only Labour that had the drive to turn them into reality (against considerable opposition in the case of the national health service).[17] Subsequent Labour ministries introduced a range of major, lasting and significant legislation, designed to open out opportunity and correct injustice – including comprehensive education and attempts to outlaw racial and sexual discrimination – despite the mixed views within the party on such issues.[18]

All such legislation has its defects. Labour has not eradicated the inequalities of class and gender. However, to attack it for this is hardly reasonable; the causes of such prejudices are too deep, the government's powers too limited. It would be more appropriate to argue that, despite its commitment to change, the party has at times made mistakes, given some issues less attention than it might have done, ignored sound advice and good ideas, and placed obstacles in the way of progress. Institutional weaknesses have prevented ideas reaching the top, and allowed factions to obstruct change. Tensions between party leaders and colleagues have prevented the party coping as well as it might have done with crises and problems.[19] In the struggle for power within Labour cabinets, some individuals have focused on their careers rather than the quality of legislation.[20] The party's tendency to fratricidal conflict has devalued its standing in the eyes of electors and occasionally turned its own organisations into battlegrounds. The impact of Labour's own culture – its myths and prejudices – on its capacity to generate policy suggests that an understanding of its internal history is vital to any appreciation of its viability as a vehicle for reform.

The chapters that follow build on the many excellent individual studies of Labour's policies and leaders. They reflect the existence of a substantial, still-developing and vibrant body of scholarship. Although written by leading authorities, they are not definitive works. There are still too many gaps in the literature for anyone to justify such a claim.[21] Nonetheless, they embrace interpretations, approaches and themes

which make this book very different from previous histories. The authors offer views and evaluations that are often new and sometimes controversial.

This is not an official history, but neither is it – in contrast to many previous works – an assault on everything that Labour has attempted to achieve. Labour's members, activists and officials are portrayed not as flawless angels, nor as zealots, but as committed individuals, engaged in public service because of a cause in which they believe and for little tangible reward.[22] Labour's thinkers and leaders appear as more thoughtful, more intellectually coherent and consistent, more dedicated, than is sometimes the case.[23] The party's policies are shown to be more rational, more practical, more reasonable and sometimes more effective.[24] Similarly, the party as a whole is seen to be less isolated from developments in other countries, and more concerned with events abroad. From the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, through the movements for colonial freedom in the 1950s, to the problems of Nicaragua in the 1980s, Labour members have supported the defence of liberty, reform and freedom.[25]

Changes during the century have required Labour to adapt its policies, to move with popular opinion, to embrace changing expert views, in order to create effective economic and social policies. Yet there are also many continuities, both in terms of values and specific policy areas (such as the commitments to modernise the economy and provide work rather than welfare). In 1997 a long and painful process of adaptation finally resulted in a landslide victory. This was only the latest of several reassessments which have taken place in the electoral wilderness. Once again, many of the party's key aims and values have remained intact, even though items of its traditional faith have been challenged in the process.[26]

It is perhaps surprising that Labour should end the century in office. Many of the industries that once underpinned the bulk of the party's support have disappeared. Some of the ideas it once championed have been discredited. Yet it is also appropriate. Despite the peaks and troughs in popularity, the tensions and conflicts, the moments of unfulfilled hope and of dark despair, the book tells the story of a party which has usually given of its best. The desire for socialist change has united more than it has divided; it has produced a record which contains far more success than failure, including policies which have vastly improved the lot of those Labour exists to serve. All those associated with this party should feel justly proud.

Notes

1 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–91* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994); Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: Fontana Press, 1996).
2 Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945. British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).
3 Marcel van der Linden and Jurgen Rojahn (eds.), *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870–1914: An International Perspective* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1990); James E. Cronin, *The Politics of State Expansion: War, State and Society in Twentieth Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1991).
4 Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the present crisis', *New Left Review* 23 (1964); Tom Nairn, 'The English working class', *New Left Review*, 24 (1964).
5 Ralph Milliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961); Leo Panitch, 'Ideology and integration: the case of the British Labour Party', *Political Studies* 19 (1971).
6 Peter Clarke, 'The social democratic theory of the class struggle', in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Working Class in Modern British History: Essays in Honour of Henry Pelling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 3–18.
7 For a review and critique of this approach, Pat Thane, 'The women of the British Labour Party and feminism, 1906–45', in Harold Smith (ed.), *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1990), pp. 124–43.
8 See the argument in Duncan Tanner, 'Socialist parties and policies', in Martin Pugh (ed.), *A Companion to Modern European History 1871–1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 133–54 and Stefan Berger and David Broughton (eds.), *Force of Labour. The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), esp. pp. 245–61.
9 See especially ch. 2 below by Tomlinson.
10 Stephen Brooke, *Labour's War: The Labour Party during the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
11 Jim Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy. The Attlee Years 1945–51* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Nick Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics. Coventry 1945–60* (London: Routledge, 1990).
12 David Jarvis, 'The shaping of Conservative electoral hegemony, 1918–39', in Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society. Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820* (London: Scolar Press, 1997), pp. 131–52; Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 'Explaining the gender gap: the Conservative Party and the women's vote, 1945–64', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880–1990* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), pp. 194–224.
13 See, for example, Kenneth O. Morgan, *Keir Hardie. Radical and Socialist*

(London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975); David Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977); Kenneth Harris, *Attlee* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982); Philip M. Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

14 Elizabeth Durbin, *New Jerusalems. The Labour Party and the Economics of Democratic Socialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); Anthony Wright, *R. H. Tawney* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987); Michael Freeden, *Liberalism Divided. A Study in British Political Thought 1914–39* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 294–328; Martin Francis, *Ideas and Policies under Labour 1945–51. Building a New Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Nick Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics* (London: Routledge, 1994).

15 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); R. Coopey, S. Fielding and N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments 1964–70* (London: Pinter, 1995).

16 Andrew Thorpe, 'The consolidation of a Labour stronghold, 1926–51', in Clyde Binfield et al. (eds.), *The History of the City of Sheffield 1843–1993*, vol. I: *Politics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Bernard Donoughue and George Jones, *Herbert Morrison. Portrait of a Politician* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), pp. 189–210.

17 Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1945–1960*, vol. II (London: Granada Publishing, 1975), esp. pp. 100–215.

18 Peter Thompson, 'Labour's "Gannex conscience"? Politics and popular attitudes in the "permissive society"', in Coopey et al., *The Wilson Governments*, pp. 136–50; Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Morgan, *Callaghan*, pp. 308–13.

19 See Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party 1900–18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 437–41 and chs. 8 and 11 below.

20 This was particularly striking during the second Wilson government. See Pimlott, *Wilson*, ch. 19.

21 For example, there are no recent studies of the first or second Labour governments, whilst very little work has been done on Labour's achievements in local government.

22 See chs. 7 and 8 below.

23 See ch. 1 below.

24 See chs. 2 and 3 below.

25 See chs. 4 and 10 below.

26 See ch. 12 below.

1 Labour's political and social thought

Jose Harris

No Labour Party can hope to maintain its position unless its proposals are . . . the outcome of the best Political Science of its time.
Labour and the New Social Order (1918), p. 23

In an essay published in 1894, Sidney Webb wrote of the need to generate a 'body of systematic political thought', as the prime task of those who hoped to 'teach others how practically to transform England into a Social Democratic Commonwealth'. Already, Webb believed, creeping collectivism in every sphere was replacing the 'unsystematic and empirical Individualism' that had dominated national life throughout the nineteenth century. But the development of a coherent rationale for such a change was required not merely to 'teach others', it was an essential part of the process of change itself. Lack of 'precision in our thinking' might not merely obstruct change but lead it in the wrong direction – towards either 'individualist' alternatives to collectivism (such as imperialism and protectionism) or 'spurious' rival collectivisms which ignored scientific laws and sought instant socialist Utopias.[1] Webb's essay was not merely a seminal document in English socialist thought, but a classic statement of the 'modernist' position in the social sciences – that correct theory was an essential predicate of right social action. Six years later, however, the rhetoric of the founding conference of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) was markedly more pragmatic. Despite the demands of some delegates for a more substantive statement of purpose, the outlook of the majority echoed a position

familiar in English political thought since the mid-eighteenth century. This was the view that what counted in politics was not 'principle' but 'interest' – the major problem for labour being that, while land and capital were amply represented in government, the interests of labour were not. It was this, rather than any unifying political theory, that brought together the component organisations of the LRC – many of whose members in their private capacities were quite frankly Liberals or Tories.[2]

These differing perceptions of the role of political theory, dating from the very foundation of the Labour Party, pinpoint certain issues that have remained salient in the party's history throughout the twentieth century. Was Labour's primary role that of an 'electoral machine' designed to win power at all costs within existing constitutional structures, or was it to forge a new kind of society and civic polity?[3] Was analytical 'theory' merely a polemical footnote to the business of power, or was it (as was reiterated in 1918 by *Labour and the New Social Order*) a key element in the gaining and use of that power – in the accurate interpretation of historical change, in the formulation of effective policies, and in democratic persuasion?[4] Was the purpose of a labour movement to take advantage of trends that were happening anyway – or was it to resist and reverse them? Was the onset of socialism a functional necessity of modern life, or was it driven by ethical, religious and humanitarian imperatives that overruled questions of practical utility?

Disentangling these issues is complicated by the very diverse character of Labour, both as a parliamentary party and as a wider movement. At both levels Labour was always a broad coalition (changing in precise character over different periods) between trade unionists, different brands of committed socialist, single-issue pressure-groups, and (particularly after 1918) individual men and women interested in various kinds of ethical and practical reform. Its historic roots lay not just in trade unionism and democratic socialism, but in radical republicanism and pro-Gladstonian Lib–Labism, Marxism and municipal reformism, positivism and idealism, Nonconformist and incarnationalist Christianity, anti-modernist mediaevalism and the quest for advanced 'scientific' modernity. Labour theorists, with a few notable exceptions, were much more interested in drafting programmes and policies than in clinical analysis of power structures – which means that Labour's understanding of the latter has often to be gleaned from the assumptions of the former. Throughout the party's history there has been movement in and out of more doctrinaire groups (on both left and right, and both inside and outside the Labour fold), which have attracted support from

those irritated by Labour's relative lack of a sharply defined official ideology. Much of the historiography of the subject has been implicitly bound up with re-fighting old internal Labour battles, between supposedly 'conservative' trade unionists and 'radical' socialist intellectuals, between evolutionary and activist models of change, between theoretical rivalries of 'left' and 'right', and between supporters and opponents of collaboration with other parties.

Concentration on such rivalries doubtless gives a certain dramatic coherence to the party's theoretical controversies over the past hundred years. Yet the historian who bores holes into such controversies may well be struck by the artificiality of the fixed ideological lineages frequently proclaimed. Throughout the century there have been instances of Labour leftists occupying ground previously vacated by theorists of the right – and vice versa. The same has been true of many Labour ideas in relation to other parties – particularly the Liberals, out of whose 'progressive' and 'radical' wings many strands of Labour thought evolved.[5] Moreover, despite the existence of powerful local pockets of 'grass-roots' Labour culture, Labour was never a self-contained 'nation within a nation' in the way that could be said at certain periods of social-democratic movements in continental Europe. On the contrary, Labour was at all times deeply embedded in the wider society of Great Britain; and the broad spectrum of Labour's political thought both reflected and influenced wider changes in national attitudes and values. From 'New Liberal' proposals on social reform in the 1900s through to those of 'New Labour' in the 1990s; from 1930s' debates about the gold standard through to present-day controversies about a European currency; from Edwardian 'social purity' campaigns through to late twentieth-century 'libertarian' movements – in all these contexts Labour's ideas on such issues as 'social justice', state power, sovereignty and personal freedom have been part of a much broader national (and international) theatre of political opinion. And, like Liberal and Conservative thought, Labour's ideas have broadly mirrored certain supra-political philosophical trends in conceptions of how language is used and how the external world is mentally constructed: trends, for example, such as the 'idealism' of the 1900s, the 'positivist' reaction of the 1930s and 1940s, the Marxian controversies of the 1960s and 70s, and the collapse of 'meaning' into the mish-mash of relativism and post-modernism fashionable at the present day.

This chapter will therefore aim to avoid assessing Labour's political thought simply in terms of pitched battles between rival intellectual factions. Instead it will take a number of classic themes – common to theorists both British and non-British, Labour and non-Labour – con-