

Is New Labour either?

Since 1997 a new age commenced in British politics, the age of the New Labour Party. After 18 years of shadow cabinet and four lost elections, the Labour Party is again back in power of the British politics and more impressive than ever before. The re-election of the Labour in 2001 and in particular the myth about the inner-party and political renewal caused numerous discussions and terms like 'New (Labour)' and 'the Third Way' came into the forefront.

What exactly is New Labour? Is it only an inexpressible ideology or is there more at the bottom of the term 'the Third Way'? This and a few further questions I will be concentrated on in the course of this essay. But, above all I would like to contemplate both the political and party renewal in the course of time and the Third Way movement all over the world.

*'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.'*¹

This is the Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution, it is precisely what the Labour Party stands for. It illustrates the party members' ideology and heart. However, is it still the case at all, that the Labours are social-democratic? In regarding the 1997-manifesto and the underlying Third Way ideology we get the best information. At first however, I would like to describe the term 'social democratic'. Paterson and Thomas defined it as '*a belief that social*

¹ Web-Link: Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution.

http://www.labour.org.uk/lp/new/labour/labour.www_main.main?p_cornerid=229375

*and economic reform designed to benefit the less privileged should be pursued within a framework of democracy, liberty and the parliamentary process*².

In the 1997 manifesto Tony Blair emphasised, next to the promotion of the family in particular, the improvement of the educational situation. According to Anthony Crosland this is one of the central ideas of ‘social equality’. It is conspicuous that Blair seems to avoid the word ‘socialism’ in his manifesto. However, full employment still seems to be of particular importance, because this is why Labour is a labour party. In his article *‘The Ideology of New Labour’*, Michael Freeden compares among other things the term socialism of the past with that of the present time. He describes the development as *‘movement from welfare to work’*³. Work is not seen any longer as a right, but rather as a duty. The development shifts from the concept of *‘human flourishing and well-being, the ethical end of optimising human creativity and eliminating human alienation’*⁴ to the mere *‘support services’* for those, *‘who are unable [...] to provide for themselves’*⁵. Yet, the party adjusted itself to the economic, political, and social changes of new times and thus its political methods. Dahrendorf claims, that socialism is dead and no variety can be revived.⁶ Callaghan and Tunney analyse claim with regards to various umbrella terms and arrive at the conclusion that there is a kind of weakening, or better another social-democracy, but Dahrendorf’s claim is too premature. They recognised a *‘significantly deregulated economy and weakened state sector’*. However, this is the direct consequence of social changes. The outcome of this includes secular trends like the end of Fordism, changes in voting trends or the shift in class structure, and modernisation. Blair does not make a secret of the fact that there is now another kind of social democracy:

*‘New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology....’*⁷

² Paterson, W. and Thomas, A., *‘Social democratic parties in Western Europe’*

³ Freeden, M., *‘The Ideology of New Labour’*, p. 46

⁴ Freeden, M., *‘The Ideology of New Labour’*, p. 47

⁵ Freeden, M., *‘The Ideology of New Labour’*, p. 47

⁶ Callaghan, J. and Tunney, S., *‘The End of Social Democracy’*, p. 63

⁷ Allender, P., *‘What’s New About New Labour’*, p. 60

The importance is not attached any longer to the universal welfare state, but to the individual. Now the individual citizen comes upon a new relation both of rights and particularly of responsibilities. Therefore, they get new possibilities in return. The redistribution of wealth is not centred any longer, but a distribution of possibilities. The previously mentioned party modernisation can be divided up in two parts: the party and the political renewal.

In comparing the manifestos, one can follow at best the political reformation. It has to be clarified, when the party started to be renewed and what influential politicians and convictions were associated with former leaderships. One fact is obvious – New Labour does not exist solely due to Tony Blair.

The revision of Clause 4 of the Labour Party constitution represents the principle item of the political renewal. Shortly after the leadership-election Blair actuated the discussion about the clause. In April 1995 the clause, formulated in 1918, was modified on previously mentioned tenor. Blair demonstrated the break with the past and moreover his party has shown unity, by supporting him with regard to his whole reform-programme. However, Blair was not the first politician, who was driven by the controversial idea of the inner-party reformation. In 1959, after an internal discussion emerged about the future of socialism, Hugh Gaitskell had already tried to push such a change, without avail. The reform should be related to the terms nationalisation and public ownership. Both were crucial points of Blair's subsequent campaign. However, Gaitskell met other realities than Blair. Supported by Anthony Crosland, he wanted to redefine both the terms 'public ownership' and 'nationalisation', and presented his project '*as part of a necessary process of ideological adaptation*'⁸. Next to his own errors in the campaign, especially the disregard of the symbolic force of Clause 4, he prevented a successful revision. Wilson mentioned later: '*... we were*

⁸ Brivati, B. and Heffernan, R., '*The Labour Party – A Centenary History*', p. 303

being asked to take Genesis out of the bible'⁹. After more than 30 years, Blair has faced the challenge in completely changed political and economic circumstances. Four lost elections, growing problems of the economy and the welfare state, a weakened union movement, and in particular the pre-work of Kinnock and Smith alleviated the situation for Blair. The welfare state as it existed, was not able to survive; that was plain for everyone. Besides, he recognised the importance of an involvement of all party-wings. Tudor Jones mentioned that the revision was an *'important symbol of Labour's modernisation and ideological adaptation'*¹⁰.

By means of this illustration it is recognisable, that there was already a thought of party modernisation at the end of the 50's. Blair's slogan, *'New Labour – because Britain deserves better'*¹¹ is not an innovation, but rather a repeat of 1964. At that time Harold Wilson promoted his campaign with the slogan *'Labour- The New Britain'*¹² and mentioned even a *'new thinking'*¹³ in his manifesto. Paul Allender claims in his article *'What's new about New Labour'* that *'essentially there is nothing new about New Labour'*¹⁴ and it is only a *'catch-up with these new times'*¹⁵. According to Adam Lent the majority regards the election defeat of 1987 as the beginning of Labour's transformation. However, this is wrong because, *'other causes and aspects of the transformation'*¹⁶ already existed before 1987. Gaitskell's attempt to revise Clause 4, can be regarded as the first action of modernisation within the party. During his leadership Wilson regarded the scientific revolution, like Blair's 1997 information revolution, as new possibilities for the British people. His attitude towards the trade unions is very similar, as well.

⁹ BBC Radio interview with Harold Wilson, February 1964; published in *The Listener*, 29 October 1964

¹⁰ Brivati, B. and Heffernan, R., *'The Labour Party – A Centenary History'*, p. 312

¹¹ Manifesto 1997 of the Labour Party

¹² Manifesto 1964 of the Labour Party

¹³ Manifesto 1964 of the Labour Party

¹⁴ Allender, P., *'What's New About New Labour'*, p. 57

¹⁵ Allender, P., *'What's New About New Labour'*, p. 61

¹⁶ Lent, A., *'Labour's Transformation: Searching for the Point of Origin'*, p. 10

*'... no place for restrictive practices or for out-dated methods on either side of industry'*¹⁷ (Wilson)

The essential beginning of New Labour is however seen in the era Kinnock. Adam Lent states in his article *'Labour's Transformation'* that the analysis and reports are oversimplified and do not realise that Kinnock already had his reformation thoughts before his leadership. Kinnock himself confirmed that he had his own reform plans, but did not want to share them with anyone else, because this could mean the early end of the reforms. After his election as party leader 1983, he started numerous initiatives with regards to political reforms. He replaced the NEC with Joint Policy Committees, he altered the defence policy by stating that *'he would keep cruise missiles'*¹⁸ and he shifted away from Labour's old-fashioned attitude to finish the engagement in the EU. In 1985 Peter Mandelson was appointed Director of Campaigns and Communication and a new epoch of campaign strategy started. Kinnock's principal task and merit was the party's reunification, after the disastrous election defeat in 1983. Martin J Smith mentioned that he *'changed the expectations of the party in the 1980's and slayed a number of important dragons'*¹⁹ and that he had the backing of the left that allowed him to change the party.

One further possibility to illustrate the party renewal, is the comparison of the different manifestos. In order to emphasise the development I have concentrated on the campaigns of 1964, 1983, 1992 and 1997. What views held the party leaders in their manifestos with regards to the perils of a nuclear threat, the fiscal system, the European Union and what significance did the nationalisation have?

With regard to the threat of nuclear weapons, Wilson mentioned a new military role for Britain and expressed his considered opinion to *'stop the spread of nuclear weapons'*²⁰ and

¹⁷ Allender, P., *'What's New About New Labour'*, p. 60

¹⁸ Lent, A., *'Labour's Transformation: Searching for the Point of Origin'*, p. 11

¹⁹ Brivati, B. and Heffernan, R., *'The Labour Party – A Centenary History'*, p. 152

²⁰ Manifesto 1964 of the Labour Party

start an era of disarmament. The Tories were blamed for *'the entry into the European Common Market'*²¹ and it was seen as a useless try to improve the economic situation. Besides, it suggested a national plan and the substitution of private monopoly with public ownership in special sectors. The economy should be incited in particular by the fiscal system and want to avoid *'untaxed rewards of passive ownership of Stock Exchange speculation'*²².

The left winged manifesto of 1983 offers a *'non-nuclear defence-policy'*²³. Michael Foot and his present party wanted to *'prepare for Britain's withdrawal from the EEC'*²⁴ and *'the return to public ownership'*²⁵, *'as required in the national interest'*²⁶. In case of a Labour government there will be increasing taxes, however with a better wealth distribution.

In 1992 Kinnock demanded disarmament, however in concern with the co-operation with the other 7 nuclear powers. With regards to Europe there is significant deviation from the old Labour point of view. *'We shall play an active part in negotiations on Economic and Monetary Union'*²⁷. It is however obvious that he did not mention the word 'nationalisation', but he spoke about *'strategic role'*²⁸ of a modern government, that do *'not to replace the market but [to] ensure that the market works properly'*²⁹. For the fiscal system he promised the improvement of the benefits, which were supposed to be 'self-financing', this is the same as increasing taxes.

1997, Blair confirmed the traditional Labour attitude towards nuclear weapons and demanded their elimination. In his opinion about the role of Britain in the European Union, he fell into line with Kinnock and is promising a *'new leadership from Britain to reform Europe'*³⁰. With regards to the economy he mentioned over-centralisation of government as a former problem

²¹ Manifesto 1964 of the Labour Party

²² Manifesto 1964 of the Labour Party

²³ Manifesto 1983 of the Labour Party

²⁴ Manifesto 1983 of the Labour Party

²⁵ Manifesto 1983 of the Labour Party

²⁶ Manifesto 1983 of the Labour Party

²⁷ Manifesto 1992 of the Labour Party

²⁸ Manifesto 1992 of the Labour Party

²⁹ Manifesto 1992 of the Labour Party

³⁰ Manifesto 1997 of the Labour Party

and the acceptance of the global economy as a reality and rejected the isolationism. He promised increasing taxes and a cut of VAT on heating.

In terms of the party renewal, I want to mention shortly the one-member-one-vote movement. For the first time this discussion emerged during Kinnock's leadership in 1984. However, he had to face the resistance of the Unions and to agree on a compromise. Smith finally managed it in 1993 to enforce the OMOV. The union vote was cut from 40 percent to one third with regards to future elections for the leadership.

Another point is the change of the party-membership. Seyd and Whiteley see the origin of the shift at the grass roots due to the election defeat of 1983 and Kinnock's modernisation. They mention a re-education-process of *'the grassroots party into changing its views'*³¹. After the election defeat of 1992, the leadership saw in a revitalised grassroots party new political electoral advantages. Blair started an extensive mobilisation campaign and the party increased its size by 40 percent and includes about 400,000 members. To get new members, who are closer to the views of the leadership, was one of the primary objects. So, you can not only recognise a change in the type of member but also striking shifts in the party attitudes on crucial topics like redistribution, nationalisation, and class politics. The typical present party member, compared with the old, is described as more conservative and relatively inactive, *'more working class, younger, less female, less affluent and less educated'*³². Issues like income, health redistribution, and public ownership lose importance and the individual becomes a priority. That means more and more of an agreement with Blair's policy.

Another point has to be taken into consideration in talking about New Labour, the Third Way. Starting with Bill Clinton's New Democrats, the Third Way ideology spread throughout the

³¹ Whiteley, P. and Seyd, P., *'New Labour - New Grass Roots Party?'*, p.20

world. Inspired by Clinton, Tony Blair came back to power with New Labour, and Gerhard Schroeder in Germany with the Social Democrats. And there are many other countries, which are affected by this movement. In his book 'The Third Way', Anthony Giddens gives us some information about critics and reproaches, that the new way of thinking has to fight against. For some it is not more than an empty concept without any real content, where others blame Clinton and his followers and protest that it is a betrayal of left-wing ideals. The Third Way is often described as a

*'new balance of economic dynamism and social security, a new social compact based on individual rights and responsibilities, and a new model for governing that equips citizens and communities to solve their own problems'*³³

The Labour Party tried to get a People's Party and involved the economy more in politics. They transformed the call for less government and more governance and abandoned the old belief in Keynesian politics. The International Herald Tribune portrayed the new relation between the government and business the best:

*'...during the Labour Party conference the streets of Blackpool were no longer invaded by miners in overalls, but by businessmen, lawyers and management consultants, most of them wearing suits and equipped with mobile phones...'*³⁴

Old Labour was seen as a party, which redistributes money in a welfare state. New Labour wants to redistribute life chances, employment and lifelong learning. Finally as described in the Schroeder/Blair-speech:

'Social democracy has found new acceptance – but only because, while retaining its traditional values, it has begun in a credible way to renew its ideas and modernise its programmes. It has also found new acceptance because it stands not only for social justice

³² Whiteley, P. and Seyd, P., 'New Labour - New Grass Roots Party?', p.19

³³ Web-Link: http://www.ppionline.org/ppi_ka.cfm?knlgAreaID=128

³⁴ 'International Herald Tribune', 30. September 1998

but also for economic dynamism and the unleashing of creativity and innovation.'³⁵

In conclusion, I have to point out that New Labour is both 'New' and still a labour Party with social-democratic principles. 'New' in particular with regards to ideology, membership, party structure and the relation to the Trade Unions and the population. It is still a labour party, because the majority of members are part of the working class and the new ideology proved itself as job-generating machine. The social-democratic opinion has changed, but due to earlier mentioned reasons nobody can deny, that it is still a social-democratic party. The new way of thinking cannot be seen as a betrayal of old principles. Blair and his fellow thinkers have only recognised that it is about time, to get rid of the out-fashioned ideology and to adapt itself to the people's way of thinking and get into closer contact with the electorate. Many little steps were necessary to create today's picture of New Labour. Initiated by Neil Kinnock, the modernisation process peaked in the 1997- election victory of Tony Blair and the revision of Clause 4. Tony Blair was the person, who made a go of the concept of New Labour and found a compromise between both young and old, and modernisation and traditional ideology. The re-election in 2001 confirmed Blair and his party to be on the right track. However, an example, which represents the transition of the newly adapted principles becoming old-fashioned again, is best presented in the presidential election 2001 in the United States. Gore lost the election as the candidate for the New Democrats. We will see how Tony Blair is able to cope with the present problems. He has not only to face domestic issues, like the NHS and the conflict in Northern Ireland, but in particular the crisis relating the 'War against Terrorism'. Gerhard Schroeder had to challenge the vote of no confidence in the German Parliament to enforce a participation of German troops in Afghanistan. How long will the British Parliament follow the United States in supporting them in this war with regards to a

³⁵ Blair, T. and Schroeder, G., *'Europe: The Third Way/Die neue Mitte'*

possible attack against Iraq? I think Labour has to stay in power to maintain the image of a new party.

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