

To what extent does New Labour continue to embrace the beliefs and values of traditional democratic socialists?

Traditional democratic socialism is characterised by a belief in equality, fraternity and liberty. In practice this means socialist governments attempt to create a classless societies through the means of collective ownership and redistribution of wealth. They strongly believe that all authority should originate from the workforce, the heart of socialism being that people should work collectively to achieve a common goal.

Democratic socialists in the Labour Party would introduce a socialist regime, but limit it within the legal democratic system. They are committed to nationalisation of industry and also place great emphasis on community.

Some people believe that the Labour Party's dominant ideology has never been truly socialist, and is more a watered down version of social democracy that some label "labourism". The Labour Party "emerged from the bowels of the trade union movement"¹ and its initial commitment was essentially to labour representation rather than socialism. Some ties between the two did exist as some trade union leaders regarded themselves as socialists. Originally there was a "contentious alliance"² between Trade Unions and the Labour Party, but following the 1926 general strike the Unions became more committed to the political party by providing a majority of their finance and subsequently the Trade Union Values coloured the Labour ideology.

Between the defeat of the Callaghan government in 1979 and the beginning of Tony Blair's premiership in 1997 the political landscape dramatically and irreversibly changed. Since the early 1980's due to the collapse of communism and the political ascendancy of neo-liberalism, Labour realised that the political tide was running strongly in one direction-towards individualism and commercialism. Everyone accepts that the centre of political gravity has moved to the right, owing to sociological changes such as the growth of the middle class.

The ideological battle between socialism and capitalism has now reached a practical compromise with social democrats now accepting that privatisation of main industries is essential for economic growth in the UK. With the ever increasing desire of power and the capturing of the political "middle ground" being the answer, all three parties adapt their opinions to appeal to the electorate and follow public opinion. It was the Labour Party's flirt with far-left socialism in the 1980's that helped hold the conservatives in power. The return of the Labour Party back to power was made by acknowledging that conservative policies were what the country wanted. Perhaps the defeat of Callaghan's government marked the death of true socialism in the Labour Party. Thatcherism changed the Labour Party almost as much as it changed the Conservative Party. Worldwide the prospects for socialism became more problematic following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Blair came to power by preaching of his ideas of "a modern social democracy for changing world"³. With Blair came many changes that were continuations of the work started by Smith. The image of the party was addressed and altered. The party was no longer segregated and clinging to Keynesian economics, it came across as united, modern and progressive. The re-branding of the Party as "New Labour" allowed the leaders to distance themselves from the reputation of past Labour governments and their "tax and spend" attitudes. The party not only changed outwardly, but also internal reforms were made. Clause IV ensured that any Labour government had to nationalise industries. Tony Blair had the clause re-written in 1995 and brought up to date. The new clause is now more open to interpretation with "by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone". New Labour embrace privatisation but still maintain the commitment to public service. The ideology of New Labour is called "the Third Way" and seems to combine economic efficiency with social compassion.

¹ Ernest Bevin

² Minksina (1992)

³ Tony Blair (Labour Party conference 1994)

The Third Way is a term used to describe the balance Tony Blair's government has struck between capitalism and socialism. When looking at New Labour position on the ideological compass many people would place it in the centre, but Blair argues that the Third Way is beyond left and right.

Those who believe in the Third Way argue that a new politics must be found that is neither old-style socialism nor the free market. Crucial to the whole idea is compromise and the acceptance of globalisation and market forces. There is a desire for a fairer society, but no longer the aim to create equality throughout society, but more the belief in equality of opportunity.

The Third Way aims to address the problems of social exclusion and is characterised by a belief in; communitarianism, no authority without democracy, protection of the vulnerable, no rights without responsibilities and an emphasis on accountability. All of these values are reflected in the changes this government has made since 1997.

Firstly a belief in the value of community. Unlike Mrs Thatcher who famously claimed there was no such thing as society only individuals, proponents still believe there is or there should be more than the nuclear family at one end and the state at the other. This does reflect the socialist belief in working together. It is this belief, combined with the idea of no authority without democracy that enthused New Labour to devolve powers to Scotland and Wales, to introduce a Greater London Authority, and to encourage elected Mayors in cities.

Secondly there is a commitment to equality of opportunity and protection of the vulnerable. Although this is not a new idea and has been used by both right and left wing party's in the past the Third Way seems to be dedicated to creating a level playing field and positively discriminating in order to aid those who need it. Some say that New Labour's plans for public private partnership expose them as right wing. However New Labour does not believe that the welfare state must end, or be slimmed down in anyway to act as a safety net to catch the most disadvantaged. New Labour are still dedicated to the NHS, and the 2001 budget revealed their plans to pour money back into the system that became starved during the Thatcher government.

Tony Giddens believes that at the heart of the Third Way is the concept of no rights without responsibilities. Their dedication to improving schools is balanced by the harsher punishments for parents that do not ensure their children to go to school. There is lots of evidence of this dominant initiative- asking parents to ensure time is put into homework, cracking down on teenage fathers, ensuring teenage mothers are prepared for their responsibilities and requiring jobseekers to attend interviews under the single gateway to welfare. The Third Way's strong moral vein comes from Blair's own beliefs and Christian Socialism. It is this that caused Blair to talk about the "right way", not the political way, or the logical way with regards to the War on Iraq.

Performance targets were introduced for both school and hospitals to attempt to encourage standards to rise Just as individuals are responsible to society, organisations especially public bodies are held to account more than ever before. However these performance indicators are just a continuation of the last government's plans renamed and represented. Although some may say this is yet more evidence that Blair has abandoned the left and embraced Thatcherism, I feel that it is only logical to adapt something already existing if it works.

Traditionally the left wing is pro Europe, but anti America. Here we see a belief entirely rejected by the Blair project. Many have criticised Blair for becoming Bush's lap dog, and fear we are being ridiculed for following him into war. Although New Labour promised the country they would introduce the Euro we are still waiting for the five economic tests set by Gordon Brown to be matched.

The traditional left's view of the exploited masses has been abandoned, the "socially excluded" people were exploited by the system set up to help them. The welfare system fostered dependence, the education system bred failure, the child support agency miscalculated and the health system did little to tackle increasing rates of morbidity.

The Third Way relies on the public sector and shares many of its values in commitments to access and equity and service. Yet like the Conservatives there is an assumption that the institutions are badly run, inefficient and are failing to deliver.

Blair appears quite authoritarian in both his policies and his own style of running government. Contradicting his belief in the value of democracy he has reduced the influence of the cabinet, and strengthened his own position in office. He has surrounded himself by men and women from the business world that would have shunted the old left wing Labour Party. This again causes people to wonder if he is a Thatcherite, and imitating the Iron Lady's presidential style of governing. People believe he has gone too far and to regard businessmen as authorities on economic policy is like asking a chauffeur to design a car.

The rethinking of Labour's relationship with Trade Union's has led people to saying that New Labour appear more committed to defending the rights of women, blacks and gays, than the traditional working class they set out to represent.

To call New Labour socialists would be unrealistic and untrue. Everyone accepts that the whole of the political spectrum has moved right. However I believe that the New Labour Party has made democratic socialist values relevant to the twenty first century, and their policies still reflect in essence some socialists beliefs just in a more practical form.

The party is a party of taxation. Looking closely we can see that although income tax didn't rise within the first five years, rises in stealth tax and especially petrol met great opposition from the people. Having kept to its promise not to raise income tax or greatly increase public spending following the 1997 election, 2001 brought about large increases in public spending, translating as tax increases. This is a way of redistributing wealth to the disadvantaged, a very basic socialist belief. Low-income families have benefited under New Labour at the expense of people in middle England. New Labour have introduced a higher minimum wage against the advice of industry. Although they have distanced themselves from the Trade Unions to allow greater freedom on policy they have lifted some of the restriction laid down by Margaret Thatcher. Finally the description of the Third Way as being "co-ordinated self-help" is a developed version of the socialist emphasis on working together.

"...No left-winger can deny that the left today is not what it used to be".

⁴Globalisation along with the disintegration of communism has resulted in industrialised countries having no far left to speak of. Left and right alike have come to accept the double-edged nature of science and technology, which generate benefits but also create new risks and uncertainties. With the demise of socialism as a theory of economic management the three parties are being forced closer together across the centre line, causing overlaps on policy. Some even suggest the One Nation Tories and New Labour supporters are ideological clones.

It is easy to suggest that Tony Blair's "New Labour" and his "Third Way" combine to form a watered down version of Thatcherism with a modern more glamorised media friendly image. His presidential style of governing the country is similar to Margaret Thatcher's and his position on privatisation of companies is a fundamental conservative belief, and far right from the "old labour" socialists. A generation ago half this country was working class and 20% was middle class. Today they are the other way round. Labour had to adapt if it wanted to regain power. No Labour leader could have come into power and attempted to undo all of Margaret Thatcher's changes. The Third Way seeks to respond to the twenty first century and apply "left of centre values to the new world"⁵. New Labour recognises the need for a moral framework and to adjust public institutions to a very different and demanding environment.

Tony Blair describes his ideology as "social-ism"⁶ and as an inevitable development from the Democratic Socialist party of the past

⁴ The Italian thinker Norberto Bobbio

⁵ Giddens

⁶ Labour Conference Speech 1994

