

MAY DISCUSSION-POINT:

THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY: VIEWED SOCIOLOGICALLY, ORGANISATIONALLY AND IDEOLOGICALLY

What follows is an account of the British Labour Party, organised not by chronology but in answer to three broad thematic questions: *who support it? how is the Party organised? and what ideology does it represent?* My commentary was first presented as a short talk at the Battersea Labour Party in late April 2011, where it provoked some interest. So I decided to expand it into my May Discussion-Point - for people of all parties – and not just those who, like me, have stuck with the Labour Party, often with very mixed emotions.

Who support the Labour Party?

Often, the Labour Party is loosely described as the party of the ‘workers’. Yet in fact it is the party of organised labour (via the trade unions) in alliance with rank-and-file members of the professional middle class (especially the ‘caring’ professions) and the left-wing intelligentsia. Of course, there are lots of individual exceptions to this sociological generalisation. After all, that is the way with broad-brush characterisations. Its basic truth, however, remains valid. Casual and non-unionised workers, who anyway have much less propensity to vote or to participate politically, are often apathetic or hostile. Although numerous and potentially recruitable, they have never been electorally central to Labour’s history. Similarly, the commercial middle class has remained suspicious much of the time, while ideologues among the right-wing intelligentsia are often very hostile.

The nature of Labour’s core alliance was explicitly stated in Clause IV of the Labour Party’s 1918 constitution. This foundational text was written by the egghead Sidney Webb.



Sidney Webb (1859-1947), later 1st Baron Passfield, came from a professional middle-class background to become a left-wing author, academic, Fabian thinker, and Labour politician.

And Labour's aim was declared unequivocally:

To secure for the workers *by hand or by brain* the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

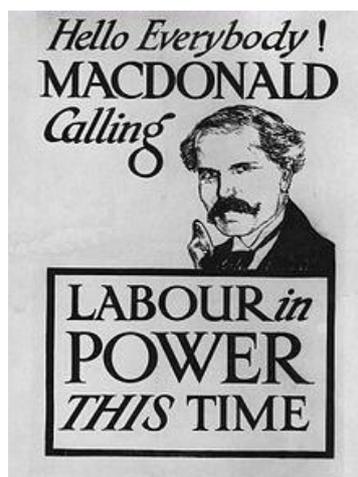
Here the point to note is the phrase 'by hand or by brain', defining the middle-class professionals as 'brain-workers' and putting them on a political par with the 'hand-workers' – a very Victorian term, recalling the conservative Lord Salisbury's description of Britain's workers as 'horny-handed sons of toil'. Needless to say, Clause IV did not intend to imply that all manual labourers lacked brains. Nor did it mean that all 'brain-workers' were particularly intelligent. Some could be very silly. But the terminology invoked the different roles of manual labourers and professional people in terms of their required input into economic production.

In practice, therefore, Labour's core alliance brought organised factory workers, engineers, railwaymen, busmen, dockers, miners, gas-workers, firemen, electricians, printers, postal workers, into close political conjunction with rank-and-file nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers, social workers, and radical clergymen. Some very senior professional men (and for much of the twentieth century these seniors were men) did indeed take a conservative stance in politics. Plenty of examples can be found among eminent lawyers, doctors, academics, and clergy. But even among the professional 'heights' there were always some noted Labour supporters. And there were many, many more amongst the lower tiers of the 'caring' professions.

Subject to ebbs and flows, this broad psephological pattern became established throughout the twentieth century and it still holds today. Labour held the country's urban industrial heartlands and, to an extent still does today. But there have been considerable structural weakenings with the decline in the percentage of workers organised into trade unions. In particular the disappearance of the mining industry was, politically speaking, as devastating for Labour as it was, socially and economically, for the mining communities. There have also been some self-inflicted wounds. Thus the teaching profession, which was one of the most absolutely enthusiastic occupational groups for Labour in 1997, became increasingly alienated by New Labour's educational bossiness and by 2010 had preponderantly shifted to the Liberal Democrats (though now unlikely to stay there).

A final point on the party's core sociology: the alliance between organised workers and the 'caring' professions provided political support for the 'industrial' wing of the

movement, as the founders had intended, by generating in politically auspicious circumstances an electoral majority that the trade unions alone could not command. On the other hand, the conjunction also brought tensions. These simmered between the generally working-class trade union bosses and, from the mid-century, Labour's middle-class party leaders. Men like Clement Attlee (son of a solicitor), Hugh Gaitskell (son of a civil servant), Harold Wilson (son of a chemist and a schoolteacher) and Jim Callaghan (son of a naval officer) were not typical of real 'workers'. And even Ramsay Macdonald, the illegitimate son of a Scottish labourer and a housemaid, rose to become Labour's first Prime Minister in 1924 without having got his hands physically dirty to make his living. He became a journalist and political campaigner before becoming an MP. And then, seemingly in compensation for his early struggles, he cultivated upper-class society, including high-society political hostesses, before agreeing to lead a National (Conservative) government in 1931. The humblest of all the Party's leaders thus ended as the most reviled in Labour circles as a 'class traitor'.



The charismatic and handsome Ramsay Macdonald (1866-1937) - here shown in a 1923 poster - rose from very humble beginnings to become Labour's first Prime Minister in 1924. But his decision to lead a National (Conservative) government in 1931 led to his expulsion from the Labour Party.

With the legacy of fighting from 'outside' to join the ranks of power, there are always some political tensions on the left. Discordant background 'noise' also comes from the unions, who provide financial backing but do not direct policy. And today there is a new mood, as rank-and-file members, including new young recruits from confident middle-class backgrounds, begin to jibe at New Labour's top-down command-style leadership. In the days of political triumphs under Blair and Brown, that central control, especially over policy-making, was hard to challenge. But in opposition there is much more to do than politicking within the Westminster 'bubble'. Individual members who don't feel involved can drop out of activism. And many do. So the need for rethinking is currently acknowledged in the debates over Peter Hain's consultation document, *Refounding Labour* (2011).

How is the Labour Party organised?

Organisationally, the Labour Party's structures still reflect its original foundation. In 1899 the representatives of the unionised workforce resolved at their annual Trade Union Congress to summon 'a special conference to establish a voice for working people within parliament'. It was a remarkable moment, attended by political and industrial activists, by the socialist societies including the influential Fabians - and also, romantically, by the venerable William Chadwick, known as the Last Chartist. As a boy of nineteen, he had been imprisoned in 1849 for participating in an unruly Chartist demonstration in favour of votes for all workers (still excluding women). And in 1900 he came as a living link with history, aged seventy, to support the new workers' party.

Initially known as the Labour Representation Committee, the growing ranks of Labour MPs soon formed themselves into 'the' Labour Party (1906). Their first leader was Keir Hardie (son of a ship's carpenter and a domestic servant), who launched his career as a miner and then a trade union organiser. He was a potent figure, with oratorical skills honed by his open-air preaching for the (Nonconformist) Evangelical Union. 'The present day is a Mammon- worshipping age', he urged in 1901. 'Socialism proposes to dethrone the brute god Mammon and to lift humanity into its place'. Despite his visionary fluency, however, Hardie won the leadership only after a series of close votes among his fellow MPs.

From the start, Labour had to contend with divisions and rivalries. Indeed, such are the passions generated on the left, and such is the relative political indiscipline or freedom that flourishes in opposition - that there have been many splits and disagreements. In 1888, the first Scottish Labour Party was founded, merging in 1895 with the new Independent Labour Party (ILP), founded 1892. Another highly localised pioneer in the 1890s was the Battersea Labour League, run by John Burns, who preferred a progressive Lib-Lab alliance. (He would surely regret the current Lib-Con coalition). The BLL refused to join the new national Party in 1906 but dwindled into oblivion by 1919.

Meanwhile, the ILP did align with the Labour Party, which was initially a federation of organisations. (Individual membership was not established until 1918). In effect, the ILP operated as a left-wing ginger group. Many of the early political activists came from its ranks; and they had their own conferences and policies. However, after the 1931 crisis, the ILP in disgust disaffiliated from the Labour Party. Nye Bevan, himself a left-winger but not a seceder, later described this deed as 'pure, but impotent'. And he proved to be right. The ILP quickly lost 75 percent of its membership. Some ILP MPs remained within the Labour Party. But other members departed to points further left, joining the communists, various Trotskyist

groups, and/or in 1934 another breakaway group known as the Independent Socialist Party.

During the Attlee era in the 1940s, however, the three remaining ILP MPs rejoined mainstream Labour. So did former ILP activists such as Jennie Lee (a miner's daughter). She rejoined her husband Nye Bevan (a miner's son) in the Commons and became an impressive Labour Arts Minister in the 1960s – noted especially for founding the Open University. As for the continuing ILP, it still met annually until 1975, though quietly fading throughout.



Labour's firebrand couple:
(L) Jennie Lee (1904-88), Minister for the Arts in the 1960s -
speaking in 1937 at a Trafalgar Square rally in support of striking busmen;
and (R) Aneurin (Nye) Bevan (1897-1960),
Health Minister under Attlee and founder of the National Health Service.
Their household rang to many debates in the 1930s
over Lee's continuing commitment to the ILP (until 1945)
and, after that, the debating never stopped within the Labour Party,
with Bevan heading the left-wing Bevanite group
in internal opposition to the Labour Leader Hugh Gaitskell.

Hardly was that saga over, when a new defection followed. In 1981, the so-called Gang of Four (Roy Jenkins; David Owen; Bill Rodgers; Shirley Williams) departed to points right, goaded, as they saw it, by the leftwards drift of the mainstream party. As a signal of their new direction, they shed all permutations of 'Labour' in their name and called themselves the Social Democratic Party, using a terminology familiar in continental Europe. This move constituted another moment of great tension. The four were all senior figures, two (Owen; Rodgers) being Labour MPs; Shirley Williams being hitherto a firm Labour favourite; and Roy Jenkins being the esteemed Labour Home Secretary in the 1960s and the recently august President of the European Commission.

But the squib was damp. The number of defectors was very much smaller than anticipated. Eventually, most of the new Social Democrats merged with the Liberals in 1988 to form the Liberal Democrats, although David Owen and a 'pure' rump refused to agree. In 1990, however, the continuing SDP was humiliated in a by-election in Labour-held Bootle. Its candidate gained even fewer votes than did the comedic Monster Raving Loony Party. At

that point, Owen and the SDP Executive finally declared a halt. (In the world of fringe politics, there is always room for another fringe. An even smaller rump of SDP members decided to continue the party, which still exists - just as another rump, this time of 'pure' Liberals, continue as non-merged pre-1988 Liberals.) As a result, centre-left activists of varying shades of opinion had an ample choice of parties. The result, however, was to split the anti-conservative vote.

Given the fissiparous nature of radical politics, and this history of breakaways, it is not surprising that official Labour rhetoric strongly emphasises solidarity. Both the party and the unions share the sentiment: 'Unity is Strength, Brothers [and, since female emancipation, Sisters]'. Nonetheless, disagreement is hard to avoid. Even without departures for other parties, Labour has many heated internal debates, with rival lobby groups within the party supporting rival positions. The most famous case occurred in 1960. Conference voted in favour of unilateral disarmament, with support from the trade union block vote (by which a large union could swing the result by casting millions of votes as one). Labour's leader Hugh Gaitskell immediately urged his supporters to 'fight, fight and fight again to save the party we love'. And in 1961 the vote was reversed. But feuding and arguments between rival pressure groups on the left and right continued for years, until the departure of the Social Democrats.

Unsurprisingly, Tony Blair was keen to discard from this legacy. In 1995, he convinced the Party to shed Clause IV. He emasculated successive Conferences, turning them into party rallies. And policy-making was handed to a new Policy Forum, with a complex constitution, much dominated in practice by the Labour leadership. In the mid-1990s, virtually all activists held their breath and avoided any public controversy, so great was the movement's desire to defeat John Major and the Thatcher legacy. Thus, while in many ways Blair's stance of New Labour had distinct links with the former Roy Jenkinsite social-democratic tradition, Blair was determined to remain within the Labour Party – and the Labour Party was equally determined to avoid damaging splits.

However, the result tended to isolate the leadership from the mass of the party, especially over time. For Blair in government after 1997 that development was personally not a problem. He had his own vision, which led him to take on some of Labour's core supporters – doctors; nurses; teachers – to show his determination that Labour should shed its reputation of supporting producers or service workers (the very trade unionists and professionals who first sponsored Labour) over consumers. In a Conference speech of 1999 he attacked the 'forces of conservatism', making it clear that such forces stretched well beyond the official Conservatives and were found within everyone. Later in the speech, he criticised the British

Medical Association, indicating the sort of interest groups which he had in mind.

Incidentally, politicians of all parties have taken on the unions, at various times and with varying degrees of success. When the lights went out, however, as they literally did in December 1973 with phased electricity cuts at the time of Ted Heath's Three-Day Work Order (immediately known as the Three-Day Week), the public turned against the Conservatives, who narrowly lost the February 1974 election. But, while the miners triumphed at this point, they were later undone by Arthur Scargill's hubris and Margaret Thatcher's determination. By contrast, the literal and metaphorical power-brokers like electricians and doctors are much more difficult to check.

Returning to Blair, the downside of his position came when he found himself isolated from mainstream party members, over issues like the Iraq war. He had his way on the policy. But he could not stop the Labour Party from haemorrhaging its membership. As already noted, if people find themselves unhappy with policies which they have no power to change or even to amend, then they have at least the option of quitting. The later years of the Labour government from 1997 to 2010 were paradoxically ones of much dominant micro-management from the political centre - yet combined, at the same time, with a weakening political base in terms of Labour membership across the country.

Very long-term trends in numbers are hard to ascertain for all political parties. In Labour's case, global assessments include members of the affiliated socialist societies and, especially, the numerous trade unionists who do not contract out of their union's political fund (the 'political levy'), even if their direct commitment may be relatively weak. Hence the often-cited postwar peak of over one million members in 1953 may be an exaggeration. After 1980, the data become more accurate. They clearly demonstrate a peak of 405,000 individual Labour members in 1997. Within ten years, however, more than half that total had gone.¹ Now (2011) things are changing again. New members, returning lapsed members, and a few former Liberal Democrats are joining the ranks. And, as far as it's possible to ascertain, the social basis of this recovery is very much within the professional and service sectors of the middle class – generally having limited contacts even with white-collar trade unions and none at all with the traditional union supporters of Labour. The two wings of the Party still survive but running in parallel rather than in unison. And the weakened role of the national Conference and Policy Forum means that the chances for re-fusion are not particularly good.

¹ John Marshall, 'Membership of UK Political Parties', House of Commons Library SN/SG/5125 (August 2009), p. 9

What ideology does Labour represent?

‘Socialism’, it was once declared, ‘is what a Labour Government does’. This quotation is regularly attributed to Herbert Morrison, the son of a police constable who became Home Secretary in the Second World War and Deputy Prime Minister under Attlee in the later 1940s. Its half-joking statement hides a half-serious point. Labour, especially in power, has always proved relatively pragmatic, both politically and ideologically. While linked with the affiliated ‘socialist’ societies, it never took the name for electoral purposes. And, especially in the later twentieth century, the term very much dropped out of the Labour leaders’ vocabulary and manifestoes.



Senior Labour figures
in a pragmatic family tradition:
(L) Herbert Morrison
(1888-1965)
Home Secretary 1940-45,
Labour Deputy Leader 1945-51,
later Baron Morrison of Lambeth
and
(R) his grandson,
Peter Mandelson (1953-),
one of the leading architects
of New Labour,
now Baron Mandelson
of Foy and Hartlepool.



As that suggests, the Party bosses have never cared much for ideological niceties. Indeed, many have prided themselves on the reverse. Morrison was a ‘doer’ not a deep thinker. And, later, his grandson Peter Mandelson, one of the leading architects of New Labour, was also determined that the leadership should not get bogged down in ideological wrangles: ‘The last thing we need is to turn in on ourselves, rather than face us [sic] up to what we have to do in the world’.

Yet such assurances cannot terminate debate. Knowing what to do, and having the chance to do it, can’t be done in a vacuum. Actions depends ultimately on politicians knowing why they have sought power, as well as their members knowing why they have campaigned in support, and electors knowing why, in broad terms, they have cast their votes in favour. Rudderless politics don’t go anywhere.

Broadly, it could be said that, for many years, there were two traditions in continual debate – or creative tension – within the Labour Party.

One was relatively hard-left, although not communist in that it did not envisage a one-party state acting in the name of the proletariat. Instead, it could be defined as ‘socialist’,

complete with all the uncertainties around that term. This tradition was represented, especially in the early days, by the ILP. It took seriously the aim of wanting a substantial redistribution of power and wealth. And it favoured state ownership, or ‘common ownership’ in the words of Clause IV, of the key ‘means of production, distribution and exchange’. In fact, there was much debate as to how thoroughly and by what means that latter ambition could be achieved. Some advocated centralised state control or direction (satirised as ‘The man in Whitehall knows best’)² but others favoured mutualism or co-operatives. In the event, most nationalisations that occurred under Labour were undertaken for pragmatic reasons – just as later, in the global financial crisis of 2008/9, a number of leading banks and insurance societies were ‘nationalised’ (though not taken under state direction) under Gordon Brown.

By contrast, the other tradition was one of moderate reform, though the precise details of such reform programmes have varied considerably over time. It can be defined broadly as social-democratic, although, as already noted, that label was not used in British politics until its inauspicious adoption by the Gang of Four in the 1980s. This tradition was cautious about the role of the state – and, under Tony Blair, it became positively bullish in support of the role of the market. But it shared with the socialists a policy concern to reduce inequalities in power and wealth. How that was to be achieved in practice proved to be difficult, as the structure of Britain’s economy and its workings within an international system proved to be mighty forces that were not easily controlled by any government.

Other differences split the left- and right-wing tendencies within Labour: for example, the left tended towards pacifism and unilateralism, while the right disagreed. But the dividing lines were never absolute. Thus the left-winger Nye Bevan opposed unilateralism at Labour’s 1957 Annual Conference, deeply upsetting most of his closest political allies in the process.

And the Labour left and right also found things on which to agree. The creation of the National Health Service in the 1940s was a case in point. Envisaged in the 1942 Report on Social Insurance by the Liberal civil servant William Beveridge and something of a compromise in its operational details, the system became a source of great pride to all wings of the Party. And, despite many pressures, the NHS remains the biggest and oldest single-payer healthcare system in the world, being free at the point of use and funded from general taxation.

By the 1990s, the old arguments between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ left – or between ‘Old’

² Douglas Jay, MP for Battersea North, wrote in *The Socialist Case* (1937) that, on some issues, ‘the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves’ – a comment that was shortened and much satirised by the Conservatives as ‘the man in Whitehall knows best’.

and ‘New’ Labour – were becoming very muted. That change was promoted not only by the flair and arguments of Blair, Mandelson and Brown, when on the rise, but also by the intellectual and political demise of the quasi-communist tradition on the European Left. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the commercialisation policies of the still officially-communist China have effectively routed arguments for total or extensive state control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, as well as of all the levers of economic policy. In that sense, the efforts of Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson and Gordon Brown, to free the Labour Party from the shadow of Clause IV have succeeded. They wished to attract votes from the commercial middle classes. And, for a while, they triumphed, even while creating new tensions in Labour’s relationship with the public sector Unions and the professions.

Today, however, things are changing again. The New Labour agenda itself is coming to seem somewhat dated. Its agenda of consumer ‘choice’ was not only politically controversial within the movement but also came to seem organisationally in conflict with an increasingly bossy attitude from the 1997-2010 Labour government, which alienated many of the professional public-service providers. Attempts at micro-managing state services from the centre stressed the ‘nanny-state’ in contradiction to any message of liberation.

Labour in opposition is being forced to rethink. The old arguments between centralisers and localisers are returning onto the agenda – and, in my opinion, will need to be resolved in favour of decentralisation. And there are many other issues, such as how to go truly green; and how to combat structural poverty. Labour has discovered the need to appeal to the commercial middle classes, which is well and good. But there is also a forgotten constituency of the casualised workforce – who are hard to help, being non-unionised, apolitical, and locationally elusive, often not even appearing on the electoral register.

People now want to debate, without tearing the Party apart. There is no appetite for feuding. And young recruits want action, not recriminations. There is much to do. In its first century, Labour has waxed and waned and waxed again, in the characteristically episodic manner of left-wing political parties. (The conservatives, by the way, are not as monolithic as they seem, having their own divisions between the traditional patriarchal landed-gentry Toryism and an insurgent, commercially hard-headed, market-driven Thatcherism). Between 1910 and 2010 Labour was in government for no more than 33 years.³ But it helped to define British politics, both in and out of power. And, in its new guise in a new century, it has much yet to do ...

³ This calculation is a crude year-count, totalling Labour governments in 1924, 1929-31, 1945-51, 1964-70, 1974-79, and 1997-2010 – but excluding Labour’s contribution to the wartime coalition 1940-45.