

## **Chapter 2: Back to the Wilderness: The Case of the British Labour Party**

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### **Introduction**

For a brief period of time in the late 1990s and early 2000s, New Labour seemed to offer a distinctive model for the renewal (or, for some critics, a betrayal) of social democracy. For 13 years, New Labour had seemingly found an electorally-successful model that also offered clues for a re-calibration of the centre-left in the twenty-first century. Yet, at the 2010 election it was ingloriously ejected from office, under the unfortunate leadership of Gordon Brown. In 2010, Brown's tired and exhausted government, battered by the MPs' expenses scandal secured just 29.0% of the vote, paving the way for David Cameron to secure office in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. If the 2010 result was lacklustre, the 2015 general election, under the leadership of Ed Miliband was far more damaging, in part, because it was unexpected. Whilst Labour increased its vote-share to 30.4%, Cameron secured a 12 seat majority. Since then Labour has convulsed into quite extraordinary territory, with the unexpected election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader. The Corbyn phenomena is without precedent in Labour's history, and at the time of writing, the party stands on the precipice of splitting, which has ramifications even beyond the creation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981.

This chapter focusses on the period from 2010 to examine why the Labour Party is losing, and on its current trajectory well may face a prolonged period of exile in the electoral wilderness. As Randall (2003) notes, there are multiple ways of examining centre-left political parties, including materialist, institutional, ideational, and electoral strategies. Here,

we adopt what Randall calls the synthetic approach, which integrates structural, institutional, ideational and agency factors. This is a comparative study, and the chapter is organised around the three core themes set out by the editors: institutions, ideas and individuals. By focussing on the interaction and symbiotic relationship between the three core elements, we can offer a view as to why the Labour Party is losing, and indeed, may well continue to do so. In this chapter, we examine the institutional factors which are stymieing a renewal of the party; what is clear is that despite the influx of new members to Labour, both under Miliband and particularly Corbyn, the core nexus between leader, unions, PLP and rank file appears to be at a critical breaking point. A focus on ideational factors examines the extent to which Labour under Brown, Blair and Corbyn has failed to find a coherent and electorally appealing renewal of the social democratic tradition. The focus on individuals draws attention to the leadership styles of the Miliband and Corbyn, and again are key explanatory factors for Labour's woes.

Here, it is also worth setting out what this chapter adds to the existing literature on the travails of Labour in the post-New Labour era. First, the chapter is to be read in conjunction with the other cases in this volume, and is structured to make comparative insights. Much of the literature on the Labour Party, tends to solely focus on the UK. Second, this chapter complements some existing literature, but also includes a distinctive analysis of the failures of the British left. For example, the two key statements of the Miliband period are offered by Goes (2016) and Bale (2015) – both important works. Goes focusses on ideational issues, and Bale has a stronger focus on institutional and electoral factors. Here, we seek to integrate such approaches. In addition, whilst there is much journalistic critique of Labour's plight – much of it interesting – there is less academic material. Further, whilst the Beckett Report (2016) offers a candid, and no doubt painful, account of the 2015 loss, it has shortcomings – not least in arguably over-playing structural factors such as the Fixed-term Parliament Act

(2011), and to some extent, down-playing the muddled leadership of Miliband. Finally, we view through a wider critical lens, and by taking in the period which includes Brown, Miliband and Corbyn, we argue that Labour's woes require a deeper analysis than insightful, but one-off electoral accounts (e.g. Ross, 2015). The chapter proceeds by examining Labour through the prism of the key themes, and concludes with further reflections of the Corbyn leadership of the party.

### **Institutions**

When seeking to understand the failure of the British left in general, and the Labour Party in particular since 2010, a sensible place to start an investigation is by examining the institutional relationship between the Labour Party and the wider labour movement. The Labour Party is the political wing of the labour movement and has responsibility for representation of the labour movement in the UK parliament. The elite of the labour movement comprise the first tier of the Labour Party: the Party Leader and Deputy Leader both of whom are directly elected by party members. When in Opposition, as Labour have been since 2010, the Shadow Cabinet with its junior Shadow Ministers and Parliamentary Private Secretaries make up the second tier of the elite. After this, one can class the backbenchers of the Parliamentary Labour Party as the third tier of the political wing of the labour movement. In the 2015 Parliament Labour has 230 MPs.

As the United Kingdom is an asymmetric polity with devolved institutions the labour movement has political representation through Scottish Labour in the Scottish Parliament. In the 2016 Scottish Parliament Scottish Labour has 23 MSP. Welsh Labour represent Labour interests in the National Assembly for Wales and in the 2016 Welsh Assembly Welsh Labour has 27 AMs. The London Labour Party represents Labour in the London Assembly and in the 2016 Assembly it has 12 seats. Labour does not contest elections in Northern Ireland but the

Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) is a sister party. In the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly the SDLP has 12 seats. In the House of Commons, the SDLP has 3 MPs all whom take the Labour whip voluntarily, and sit with Labour members. Finally, at the sub-national level local representatives of the Labour Party are elected as councillors to town, borough, district, city and county councils many of which are unitary authorities. In England and Wales since 2015 Labour controls 110 local authorities (Local Government Association, 2015). In Scotland since 2012 Labour run 8 councils and are in coalition in a further 8 (Curtice, 2012: 24)

The wider labour movement comprises affiliated trade unions, socialist societies, registered supporters and party members. In recent years Labour has been successful at engaging young people through social media. The immensely large amount of £3 registered supporters and, in particular, the number of young people who joined Labour to vote for Corbyn in summer 2015 are evidence of this. Similarly, in July 2016 the membership of the Labour Party was estimated to be nearly 600,000 as over 100,000 people had swiftly joined to participate in the leadership election after Angela Eagle initially challenged Jeremy Corbyn (Bush, 2016). In numerical terms, Labour Party membership is at its highest for decades. But many new registered supporters have not become regular activists within constituency Labour parties. The phenomenon of sudden expansion Labour membership appears to be one where people – especially younger people - buy in to the leadership election process with the goal of voting for their preferred candidate. To an extent the institutions of the labour movement are growing in numbers and reaching younger citizens. At the same time the Parliamentary Labour Party is riven with bitter division. On 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016 the Labour MPs voted by 172-40 for a motion of no confidence in Corbyn's leadership (BBC News, 2016).

The referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union is the most revealing example of the institutional challenges facing the Labour Party. The referendum was won on the issue of immigration (Jonas, 2016). The argument which carried the day was that uncontrolled, mass, low skill immigration has had a deleterious effect on working class communities. Brexit revealed a divided Britain with especially deep fissures on the English left over the type of country Labour-inclined voters want to see (Beech, 2016: 128). This can be understood as the progressive left versus conservative Labour. According to YouGov figures 65% of people who voted Labour in the 2015 general election opted for 'Remain' whilst 35% chose 'Leave' (YouGov, 2016). In a YouGov poll of Labour Party members 90% responded that they voted 'Remain' with 9% responding that they voted 'Leave' (Curtis, 2016). Brexiteers were more likely to be older, modestly educated and live in the provinces of England and Wales (Moore, 2016). Brexit has stirred a more conservative vision of the English left in the hearts and minds of many instinctive Labour voters.

The Brexit result demonstrates that there is no shared vision for the good society on the British left. The political identity and values of the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party, party members and registered supporters is at variance with millions of Labour-inclined voters especially those from working class communities. The part that the institutions of the British left have played in its malaise pertains to what can be explained as the values gap. This is the gap in social values between those voters who historically have been Labour-inclined and the activists and politicians within the Labour Party. The Labour Party and labour movement has ceased to be a broad church in terms of social values and is more accurately described as a handful of disputatious political sects. On issues such as membership of the European Union, mass immigration from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the culture of human rights, feminism, gay marriage and patriotism Labour

politicians and activists are firmly progressive (Edwards and Beech, 2016: 494). This is not the vision of Labour politics recognised by older voters, non-metropolitan voters and many working class voters in Labour's heartlands. The values gap argument relates not to economic perspectives where the breadth of opinion within the labour movement is plain for all to see. The socialism of the hard left Corbynites is different from the soft left social democracy of Ed Miliband and his inner circle which, in turn, was different from the centrism of the Brownite and Blairite centre-left. Labour-inclined voters do not clearly coalesce around one variant of Labour political economy.

The other factor in the values gap argument is that the more conservative vision of the left is alien to Londoners. London Labour is the epitome of cosmopolitanism and is necessarily progressive. This leads us to the second point - geography matters. A further difficulty for the Labour Party comes, in part, from the dominance of London. The nation's capital is a bedrock of the Labour Party with 45 out of 73 MPs. Its voter base is disproportionately young, wealthier than average, socially liberal and represented (some might say over-represented) in the mass media. Its voice is therefore loud and it receives multiple platforms in the broadcast and print media to press its case for progressive Labour values. When this progressive left voice reverberates outside of the metropolis, and is received in the Labour heartlands, it is as hard to comprehend as an unknown tongue

## **Ideas**

At the heart of Labour's current plight lies an ideational paradox. The spectre that continues to haunt the party is the legacy of New Labour. British Labour has not yet decisively, and in a unified way, answered the question of what the post-New Labour party stands for. This is not an uncommon phenomena. As Bale (2010) deftly points out, it took the Conservative Party four leaders and thirteen years to reconcile itself to the Thatcherite legacy. The paradox for

Labour is that ‘New Labour’ was built upon a broad consensus of ideas and principles, and yet remained quite contradictory (see Gamble, 2010; Manwaring, 2014). Thematically, New Labour was conceived around a new political economy largely accommodating the Thatcherite legacy; a focus on social inclusion (and not inequality); an enabling state, a focus on community, and a shift to equality of opportunity (not outcome) (Driver and Martell, 2000). Of course, these were synthesised most coherently by Anthony Giddens and his extensive writings on the Third Way, and Blair’s own Third Way pamphlet. The key issue is that even if some normatively challenged the New Labour consensus, the range of ideas was relatively coherent and it clearly found electoral support. The fragility and internal contradictions were exposed most fatally by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

Ideationally, neither Brown, Miliband nor Corbyn have yet found a similar winning formula. As Beech (2009) argues, a striking feature of Gordon Brown’s time as party leader was a refusal to build an ideological narrative for his government. Indeed, the party’s manifesto at the 2010 election, whilst rich in policy detail, and with a strong focus on rebuilding the British economy, lacked a clear ideational identity. Of all the leaders post-Blair, Brown was most acutely caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of New Labour’s ideational legacy and the response to the GFC. Perhaps, the strongest point of ideational difference was Brown’s, albeit limited, attempt to develop an agenda on democratic renewal (Labour Party, 2010). It remains unclear though, if Brown had won in 2010 how far this push for devolution and the elusive ‘new politics’ would have been delivered.

Ideationally, of all three leaders, Ed Miliband remains the most intriguing in his quest to reformulate social democracy. As Goes (2016) critically outlines, Miliband flirted with and was restless with a wide range of ideas and principles during his tenure. Despite his claims, Miliband never quite fully broke with New Labour, yet in his ideational fluctuations we see an attempt to rethink some core principles, including:

- equality (via predistribution)
- the State (via Blue Labour)
- capitalism (via ‘producers vs. predators’)
- class and social cohesion (via One Nation)

Brevity forbids a detailed examination of Miliband’s ideas, but the rough contours can be outlined. A defining, and clear ideational break from New Labour was Miliband’s interest in notions of inequality (see Miliband, 2016). Miliband tried to re-calibrate policy around tackling structural forms of inequality, and his advisers flirted with Joseph Hacker’s notions of predistribution. Simply, this refers to state interventions in the market before traditional redistribution/tax transfers take place, childcare funding being commonly cited as an example. Tactically, this potentially meant a rediscovery of earlier social democratic traditions, but without recourse to a traditional ‘tax and spend’ approach. Predistribution remains a contested concept, and Miliband both struggled to articulate what it meant or give it coherent policy expression. Second, Miliband attempted to offer a more sustained critique of capitalism with his focus on ‘predators’, not producers. The difficulty for Miliband, was an ongoing tendency to raise ideas which either lacked coherence or clear policy expression.

Moreover, Miliband’s ideational journey had then moved on. Early on Miliband was influenced by the ‘Blue Labour’ notions most closely associated with Maurice Glasman (Davis, 2011). The insight here was Glasman’s critique of the statist tradition in Labour thinking, and its abandonment of community and other sources of collectivist power. Miliband was influenced to some extent by this thinking, and found expression in his adoption of community–organising and campaigns like the ‘living wage’ (the latter co-opted by Conservative Chancellor George Osborne). Yet, Miliband’s views on the role of the state



were not as clear as New Labour's 'enabling state' motif. As is well-documented, Miliband backed away from Blue Labour following Glasman's controversial comments about immigration and engaging with supporters of the English Defence League (EDL). Again, a core ideational problem for Miliband, and Labour has been to articulate a clear policy agenda on immigration which appeases working class people and multicultural elites in London, whilst respecting the principle of free movement of people. The vexed issue of Labour's stance immigration was given full airing with Gordon Brown's ill-fated meeting with Labour voter Gillian Duffy in the run-up to the 2010 election.

The next 'big idea' was to re-claim Disraeli's 'One Nation' label to re-assert a more consensual form of governance, to some extent more like a German social-market model. Yet, as outlined elsewhere, despite much interest in the idea by Jon Cruddas during the policy review, Miliband's own personal commitment to idea was lukewarm at best. Moreover, as an ideational principle it actually gave few clues for a clear re-formulation of social democracy. In sum, Miliband's ideational journey reflected both a determined effort to engage in new ideas and break from New Labour orthodoxy, but was beset by inconsistent messages, poor policy proposals and ambivalence from Miliband himself on some of these agendas.

Ideationally, Corbyn is the clearest 'circuit-breaker' from the New Labour ideational model. Corbyn's politics are much contested, and arguably the 'radicalism' of his thinking is probably over-stated. Corbyn's ideational agenda is organised around the following themes (Corbyn, 2016):

- A 'new politics' fostering particular forms of 'grassroots democracy'
- A 'new economics' linked to his strident anti-austerity agenda
- A focus on internationalism in foreign affairs.

Arguably, Corbyn's foreign policy agenda is the clearest break from the New Labour era.

Ideationally, Corbyn's use of the term socialism is not always clear, but it clearly has its roots in traditions from the Bennite New Left faction of the party in the 1980s. To date, it remains far from clear how either Corbyn or John McDonnell (the Shadow Chancellor) can forge a distinctive new political economy. It seems to hark to a pre-1990s Swedish form of Scandinavian social democracy with an unashamed use of tax measures to defend core welfare state institutions. Nor is it clear how Corbyn and McDonnell have engaged with the sustainability of a welfare state model that was best suited to the heyday of the Keynesian demand management (for a more nuanced critique of this dilemma see Andersson, 2014).

Ideationally, Labour has shifted from its New Labour moorings quite considerably since the fall of the Brown government. Whilst Miliband's efforts have been the most intellectually fresh, there was a failure to make them cohere. The existential crisis for British Labour continues, and it is unlikely that Corbyn can offer an ideational package which electorally succeeds where both Brown and Miliband failed. Labour is losing, largely because it has not shifted beyond the paradox of New Labour's ideational legacy.

## **Leadership**

The leadership styles of Brown, Miliband and Corbyn are contrasting in tone and approach but similar in an important way, namely their slow footedness and natural unease on multiple media platforms. Brown struggled to display empathy whilst Prime Minister. Meeting members of the public did not sit comfortably with him and the 'smiling Brown' appeared contrived (Saul, 2014). This was not the baron of HM Treasury that the public had seen bestriding Whitehall for the previous ten years. Brown was better at the Despatch Box arguing data points and policy.

Miliband was less convincing than Brown in the House of Commons. This view must be tempered however by the fact that as Leader of the Opposition he did not control the political narrative of the day. Nor did he have the apparatus of the state surrounding him which adds gravity to a political leader. Miliband was nonetheless a competent and calm interviewee and appeared relaxed when interacting with the public. Criticisms of his leadership style came in the form of the politics of perception; that he was a policy-wonk displaying occasional signs of social maladjustment. This was largely created and fuelled by the Conservative supporting tabloid press. Miliband's shortcomings lay in the fact that he was considered, quite correctly, to be a left intellectual (Pickard, 2015) and despite representing Doncaster North, he came across as very much part of the Westminster establishment. When one recalls that Miliband (like many of his generation) never had a professional career outside of politics, coupled with the fact he was a long-time Treasury advisor to Brown, and that his brother is a former Labour Foreign Secretary, the view that he occupies the Whitehall-Westminster bubble is difficult to refute.

Corbyn is unique in the modern era. A Labour leader who appears uncomfortable when interviewed and unconvincing at the Despatch Box. His preferred environment is that of the extra-parliamentary protest where he is skilful in making speeches to like-minded supporters. Corbyn is much less disposed to engage with those who sharply disagree with him or, in the media's case, appear to ask him critical questions. This is possibly due to the fact that throughout a long parliamentary career Corbyn has been a backbench rebel. In the years 1997-2010 he was the most rebellious Labour MP in Parliament (Cowley, 2016). Corbyn's leadership style is reinforced due to the strength of his mandate from the overwhelming victory in the leadership contest of 2015 where he won in each of the three sections (BBC, 2015). With invaluable assistance from Momentum - a dedicated group of supporters - who have successfully targeted young voters through social media, and deployed

groups of activists in many constituency Labour parties (especially in London), the Corbyn brand has become a highly effective recruiting sergeant for Labour. This has reinforced Corbyn's control of the wider Party but highlighted the internecine struggle within the Parliamentary Party which is in constant discussion of how to remove him.

Brown, Miliband and Corbyn display quite significant weaknesses in leadership style but arguably a more significant issue is the *values gap* mentioned above. As Prime Minister Brown frequently spoke of Britishness. Understandably so, as a Scot, and MP for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath who believed in the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But England - barring London - was overlooked. This would prove costly for Labour in the long-run. Miliband tried to connect his ideas of the 'squeezed middle' to the struggles of the employed strivers outside of the wealthy classes (BBC News, 2010). Yet he could not adapt his metropolitanism; grasping the depth of concern from Labour-inclined voters towards mass immigration from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and gay marriage, was a cultural bridge too far for him to cross (Edwards and Beech, 2016). Corbyn, like Miliband, is London Labour. Their economic preferences, approach to foreign policy and the defence of the realm are very different. One an acolyte of Tony Benn the other a one-time Brownite. But what unites them, and the mainstay of Labour politicians and activists, is progressivism. Or put another way a worldview of ardent social liberalism. The problem of the *values gap* is both an institutional and a leadership problem for the Labour Party.

## **Conclusion**

British democracy is in a state of unprecedented flux, buffeted by a fragmenting union, a political class still recovering from the MPs expenses scandal, and of course, the divisions and uncertainty following the Brexit vote. Structurally, the biases in the electoral system are both masking and exacerbating deeper divisions. What was once a relatively stable two-party

system is shifting to a new multi-party ecology. As many commentators have pointed out, at the 2015 election, UKIP attracted 3.88m votes and won one seat. In contrast, with Labour annihilated in Scotland, the SNP with 1.45m votes won 56 seats. Labour's loss has to be located in the wider public detachment from the major parties, which is masked by both the surge in party members since Corbyn became leader. Whilst we might attribute much of the loss in 2010 to tiredness and a back-lash against the GFC, these wider structural factors are more important.

More widely, as Gamble (2010: 641) notes, one way of understanding the trajectories of Labour through a series of 'cycles'. Arguably, the 2008 GFC marks a new cycle for Labour's identity. It is worth reflecting that whilst Labour is currently losing, until the advent of New Labour, this is not a particularly new phenomenon. British Labour's post-war electoral record is patchy at best. One interpretation might be to understand Labour's electoral appeal by borrowing a concept from public policy - 'punctuated equilibrium' (see Cairney, 2012). Broadly speaking, political systems are both stable and dynamic, and in between periods of incremental change, there can be periods of intense activity. It could well be that even if there is support for wider social democratic ideals in Britain, voters have not historically always chosen Labour to deliver them. Labour's appeal might be to establish crucial public institutions and goods (e.g. the NHS, British Rail, the National Parks and the Open University); and then be ejected from office. On this reading, it may well be several elections before it has a new political imagination to deliver the next set of critical public goods in the twenty-first century.

Relatedly, a key factor in explaining why Labour is losing, and might continue to lose, is the conservative impulse of the party. As David Marquand (1991: 37) reminds us, for much of the post-war period, Labour was essentially 'conservative', partly because it was an instrument of a 19<sup>th</sup> century economic model unable to meet the challenges of the twentieth

century. Marquand suggests when Labour won office, British voters were asking it to restore a previous political order. Oddly, under Corbyn, there is a conservative impulse – ultimately to re-assert a form of social democracy from the 1980s. Indeed, writers like the late Tony Judt (2009) see a key impulse of a revitalised social democracy to ‘conserve’, by defending the achievements of the past undone by neo-liberalism. Corbyn’s agenda – probably what we might unhelpfully call ‘old Labour’ might meet this criterion in its conservative mission to defend the NHS. However, this might not be enough in the complexity of modern politics, not least as there is a much clearer value placed on the role of leaders. British politics is now a multi-party system, the electorate is far more fragmented – especially with the shift to identity, not class politics in Scotland, and more crucially, this is an era of ‘valence’ politics (Johnston and Pattie, 2010).

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