

Did Labour fundamentally change Britain in its thirteen years of power? Hardly at all

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The 'new Labour' governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown altered the societal landscape in the UK. But did they fundamentally change Britain? In a new book, [David Walker](#) and [Polly Toynbee](#) take an in-depth and balanced look at the achievements of the Labour project. There were some policy successes, and the authors give Labour 6 out of 10 for these. Yet the party lacked an overall vision or narrative, and so squandered its opportunity to push the UK in a more social democratic direction.



Autumn bookshelves groan under the weight of Labour's diarists. Blair has written his [memoirs](#), though [Peter Mandelson](#) got his retaliation in first. [Jonathan Powell](#) followed suit, in succession to [David Blunkett](#), [Chris Mullin](#) and others, some more distinguished in their handling of prose than others. Our book, [The Verdict](#) tries to offer a 'balanced scorecard' based on what Labour intended and what it said it was doing, but measured ultimately by its impact on people.



For what it is worth we award Labour six out of ten points. Some sort of 'in the round' judgement is both necessary and possible. Of course the moral and geopolitical significance of the UK's joining the Americans in invading Iraq in 2003 is incommensurable with, say, Labour's impressive programme of rebuilding and refinancing further education. You can map results in terms of Labour's intentions, and try to balance one thing (schools) against another (the promotion of CCTV).

The government hung together, despite the toxicity of relations between number 10 and number 11; the return of Peter Mandelson to the fold under Gordon Brown symbolized Labour's basic unity. But political identity did not deliver coherence in policy. This was a [zigzag](#) government, triangulating, deliberately avoiding definition. Where is the narrative? Why were Labour's constitutional reforms so scrappy and incomplete? That is not to say they weren't profound; the 1998 Human Rights Act and devolution of legislative and executive power to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast permanently changed the government of the UK, and Freedom of Information is now a permanent fixture of our democracy.

The record is obviously mixed. In 13 years we had aborted Lords reform, the introduction of the Equalities Act, an explosion in prison numbers, increased support for the arts and sports, free museum entry, flip flopping on drugs, and improved morbidity. We got better schools attainment levels, and more support for further education – but no apparent improvement in the UK's productivity record. And so on.

Establishing causal links is hard. On Labour's watch the volume of crime fell, as measured in the British Crime Survey. The chances of being a victim of violence were lower by 2010 than at any time since the BCS began in the early 1980s. But criminologists ascribe only a small part of that fall to Labour's expansion of police numbers, let alone the 32,500 increase in the prison population of England and Wales. A lot had to do with economic prosperity and, possibly, Labour's active social policies for young people. The Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition government is likely to regret its precipitate abandonment of the Connexions programme and its attempt to shuffle off local authority youth services into the maw of the 'Big Society'.

Some of Labour's failures, we argue, are generic: they apply to all governments. The pretensions of ministers in their department, so faraway from the coalface: how little they (or we) understand about what is going on, in markets or inside families. Ministers pull on levers in their departments and often find nothing happens or there are unintended consequences.

The greatest political problem of the Labour years, we conclude, was you, us, them. The public was contradictory in attitude and infantile – wanting hopelessly contradictory things. Triangulation and tergiversation (Brown's famous stealth) reflected public ambiguities.

Labour's increases in spending were willed by the people, but Labour ministers could not or would not force the issue of how to finance a necessary expansion of public sector investment and services. The deficit bequeathed by Labour was, for the most part, a transfer of private sector indebtedness to the public

accounts, as a result of the financial crash plus the cost of fiscal stimulus in the face of the recession. But it was in addition a product of political failure – to turn the electoral exuberance of 1997 into a wedge of opinion favouring the adjustment of British political economy in a social democratic direction

Labour did shift the rhetoric of politics – witness David Cameron’s robing himself in the vestments of fairness and equality. Even with Tony Blair at the helm, Labour had to contend with levels of media antagonism and bondholder suspicion not so different from those that enveloped Ramsay MacDonald. So on balance, as the subtitle of our book asks, did Labour change Britain? The answer is: hardly.

To learn more, see David Walker and Polly Toynbee’s book, [The Verdict, did Labour change Britain?](#) (London: Granta, 2010).

Polly Toynbee and David Walker will be discussing their new book with [Jonathan Hopkin](#) on Tuesday, 16 November, at the LSE. [Click here](#) for further details and information on how to attend.