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Chapter X

'Renaissance' without Enlightenment: New Labour's 'Learning Age' 1997-2010

John Holford and Thushari Welikala

"Technical education, though it must be an integral part of our educational system, is not an alternative to non-vocational education. The latter is a universal need; but whether the former is necessary depends on the character of the employment." (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919, p. 174)

"There is perhaps no branch of our vast educational system which should more attract ... the aid and encouragement of the State than adult education. ... This ranks in my opinion far above science and technical instruction The mental and moral outlook of free men studying the past with free minds in order to discern the future demands the highest measures which our hard-pressed finances can sustain." (Winston Churchill 1953, quoted in TUC 1953, p. 173)

"Education is the best economic policy we have." (Tony Blair 1998, quoted in DfEE 1998, p. 9)

In the British general elections of 1997 and 2001, the Labour Party under Tony Blair's leadership achieved its largest parliamentary majorities ever – greater even than in 1945, the year generally seen as Labour's highest tide. Labour's victory in 2005 was also substantial, providing a working majority for two prime ministers: first Blair and then, after his resignation in June 2007, Gordon Brown. As a result, Labour had its longest ever period in government (1997-2010).¹ The Labour government of 1945-50 was responsible for the bulk of Britain's welfare state. For many of its supporters, 1997 was also a moment of soaring hope, bringing an end to eighteen years of increasingly neoliberal Conservative rule. Hopes were certainly high among those committed to adult education. In the event, vaulting ambitions went unrealised; achievements in lifelong learning were modest. In respect of adult and lifelong education, the government abandoned values which had previously been central to Labour thinking, and accepted policies and practices which were little different from those espoused by the previous Conservative administration. This chapter summarises what the Labour government achieved, and explains how – at a very early stage – the

¹ Strictly speaking, there were four Labour governments during this period: under Tony Blair (1997-2001, 2001-05, and 2005-07), and under Gordon Brown (2007-10). In this chapter, however, unless otherwise specified, the term 'Labour government' refers collectively to all four.

ambitions of those who sought to ensure citizenship, democracy and liberal education were key themes of a learning society were defeated.²

In Opposition, Labour had developed expansive rhetoric on the value of education: Blair famously announced in 1996 that his three top priorities for government would be “education, education and education”. David Blunkett, Labour’s Education spokesman from 1994 and Secretary of State for Education and Employment throughout Blair’s first government (1997-2001), had personal experience of adult education, having studied part-time to qualify for university. Prior to becoming a member of parliament, he had for thirteen years been a further education lecturer. He had also been a notably radical Leader of Sheffield’s city council, and was closely associated with a number of thoughtful and educationally influential Labour intellectuals such as Michael Barratt Brown, the founding Principal of Northern College, Bob Fryer his successor, and Bernard Crick, Professor of Politics at Sheffield University (Taylor 2004, Fryer 2010). Fryer comments that, as the principal of a college established for working-class adult education, the new government – and Blunkett’s appointment in particular – brought ‘much relief and high expectations’ (Fryer 2004, p. 69).

Labour’s Record

From a similar perspective, however, the actual record of the Blair governments on lifelong learning has been described as ‘pretty dismal’: ‘As so often in the history of the British Labour Party ... optimism, ambition and high hopes were all but dashed in the unfolding period of government’ (Taylor 2009, p. 75). ‘Overall,’ Taylor concluded, the Labour government’s ‘essential ideological drive, and the consequent practice’ in lifelong learning policy was

geared to human capital perspectives, within a particular version of meritocratic expansion and marketised welfarism. Far from being a transformative agenda for social democratic change, [the government’s] lifelong learning policy thus aims for the incorporation of an increasing number of learners into the existing free-market culture; thereby, it is argued, producing beneficial, wider social effects – reducing alienation, improving social cohesion and so on. (Taylor 2009, p. 75)

² This chapter focuses on England. Relationships between the countries of the United Kingdom are complex, and changed over this period. England is very much the largest country: a population of 52.2m in 2010 (84 per cent of UK total of 62.3m); Scotland’s was 5.2m, Wales’s 3.0m, and Northern Ireland’s 1.8m (ONS 2011). Until 1999 education in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales fell under the Scottish, Northern Ireland and Welsh Offices of the UK government, which were responsible to the UK parliament. In 1999 new legislatures and administrations were created in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, to which responsibility for education was devolved. The UK parliament did not devolve its powers over education in England, which were the responsibility of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE: this was renamed the Department for Education and Skills [DfES] in 2001). On taking office in 2007, Gordon Brown divided education in England between two government departments, responsible, broadly speaking, for children and adults respectively: the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). In 2009 the latter was amalgamated with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform to form a new Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS or DBIS).

Taylor based his view on a consideration of three important policy areas (skills, widening participation, and civic or social purpose education). On the first, skills, he suggested the Labour record was 'long on rhetoric and vision but rather short on delivery, or even viable structures for delivery'. Citing 2004 research, he thought learning *opportunities* for employees had increased, but the *actual increases* in participation in training, whether on and off the job, had been 'slight' (Taylor 2009, p. 75). If anything, the position deteriorated – despite frenetic policy development and rhetoric associated with the Leitch review (2006; see below): participation in job-related education and training remained pretty constant (between 28.2 per cent and 28.7 per cent) between 2001 and 2006, but then declined quite sharply (to 27.2 per cent in 2007 and 25.6 per cent by 2010) (Aldridge and Tuckett 2011, p. 13). (It is, of course, probably fair to ascribe some of the post-2006 deterioration to recession, rather than to educational (or 'skills') policies – though on the same argument, the business cycle should take some of the credit for earlier levels of participation.)

On the second policy area, widening participation in adult learning, Taylor's verdict was: 'the same mixture of rhetorical advocacy, some achievement but essentially modest progress'. In relation to higher education, the numbers participating had increased rapidly, but 'very largely through greater participation from the higher socio-economic groups' (Taylor 2009, p. 74). This verdict seems fair. By and large, different researchers have reached similar conclusions, using various data sources and methodologies (Bolton 2010, Stevenson and Lang 2010). The National Audit Office, drawing on a range of data, concluded:

Participation in higher education in England ... of young people (17-30 year olds) has fluctuated from 39.2 per cent in 1999-2000 to a peak of 42.5 per cent in 2005-06. It currently stands at 39.8 per cent in 2006-07. ... Not all relevant groups in society are represented ... in proportion to their representation in the population as a whole. ... Women are better represented than men and those from non-white ethnic groups are better represented than white people. Social class remains a strong determinant of higher education participation with the proportion from lower socio-economic backgrounds having remained largely static over the past five years. White people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, both men and women, are the most under-represented group. (National Audit Office 2008, p. 11)

There are, however, some indications that, so far as the social class mix of higher education is concerned, the situation began to improve in the government's later years: for instance, a 2009 study of *Full-time Young Participation by Socio-Economic Class* (in higher education) concluded:

over the period 2002/03 to 2007/08, full-time young participation for the top three socio-economic classes fell from 45.2% to 41.2%, while for the bottom four socio-economic classes this has increased from 18.1% to 21.0%. The socio-economic class gap between these two participation rates has consequently narrowed by 7.0 percentage points (DBIS 2009, p. 1)³

³ There are frequent references to the weakness of data on social class and participation. This particular report, for instance, comments that as its 'measure draws from a number of data sources and therefore contains a number of weaknesses, it should be interpreted carefully' (DBIS 2009, p. 1).

Higher education, though a dominating element of public expenditure on education for adults, is not typically regarded as lifelong learning or adult education. Taylor found Labour's record on adult participation in learning even more disappointing, and it is hard to disagree. According to the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), the proportion of adults 'currently' participating in learning in 2002 (23 per cent) was the same as it had been in 1996 (i.e., in the last year of the previous Conservative government), though there had been a slight increase (from 17 to 19 per cent) in the proportion who reported they had participated over the 'last three years'. By the end of the Labour government in 2010, the situation remained mixed: current participation had actually *fallen back* to 21 per cent (two percentage points below the figure for the year before Labour came to power), although 22 per cent now reported participation during the 'last three years' (Aldridge and Tuckett 2011, p. 11).

Disaggregating *overall* participation in adult learning, some more positive trends emerge. Between 1996 and 2010, the gender gap not only narrowed but reversed: participation (current and during the 'last three years') among men fell from 43 per cent to 41 per cent while among women it rose from 38 per cent to 44 per cent (Aldridge & Tuckett 2011, p. 14). In terms of social class, drawing on the 2004 NIACE report, Taylor commented that between 1996 and 2004, the learning divide had actually widened, with participation rates falling for all except the higher socio-economic groups. By 2010 the record was better; there had been a significant increase in participation among the lower socio-economic classes (although to levels still well below those among the more affluent groups: see Table X.1).

[Table X.1: about here]

Three other features of Labour policy on widening participation in lifelong learning emerge from Taylor's review. The 'overwhelming concentration' was on younger learners, particularly those aged 18-21 (and, in higher education, on full-time students living away from home); the 'large majority of widening participation learners in higher education' studied at 'lower status' universities and colleges; and the government's 'overriding purpose in widening participation policy' was 'to enhance the skills levels in the workforce through vocational training'. He comments, in relation to the last point, that

This perspective omits any recognition that there is a need to enable more and different learners to have access to a liberal and critical education; nor does it allow any collective or community notion of education – it assumes an entirely individualistic (and 'marketised') frame of reference. (Taylor 2009, p. 75)

This limitation also applied to Taylor's third policy area, civic or social purpose education. This has 'a long history' in British (and perhaps particularly English) adult education, 'from the 'Mansbridgean' [see below] ethos of education for personal enlightenment and development, to socialist and other radical – often community orientated – provision'. Labour gave 'rhetorical recognition in at least some government papers and policy statements' to the importance of "liberal adult education" and associated themes', thought Taylor, and 'a few' programmes (such as the Neighbourhood Renewal Initiative) had 'a real base in community development perspectives' (Taylor 2009, p. 75). Unfortunately, these were

very much the exceptions. Exhortations to even modest and moderate liberal perspectives are rare, *sotto voce*, and very largely rhetorical: ... through the period [1997-2010] this element has been consistently sidelined. (Taylor 2009, p. 75)

In sum, the Labour governments of 1997-2010 brought rhetoric aplenty, especially on the need for lifelong learning; and a good deal of new policy too. They also brought many new mechanisms and structures for delivery: funding agencies and systems, targets, and the like. The cult of institutional 'modernisation' sometimes seemed tantamount to a 'permanent revolution' of institutions. There were also broader policy priorities which had a significant impact on the policy and practice environment, and on the language of debate, in lifelong learning. For example, a Social Exclusion Unit, established in 1997 (and lasting until 2006), promoted 'social inclusion' across policy areas; and 'citizenship' – often 'active citizenship' – became an important priority in certain areas (Millner 2008). These made discussion more civilised. But if one turns from rhetoric, language and policy debate to delivery and impact, the record disappoints; and in particular it disappoints from perspectives informed by traditions of social democracy and liberal adult education.

English Adult Education: Enlightened Traditions

How were the high hopes dashed? Explanations can be found at a number of levels. It is true, of course, as Rizvi and Lingard argue, that a 'particular social imaginary of globalization, namely neoliberalism, has underpinned educational policy shifts around the world over the last two decades' (2010, p. 184). Even while hopes remained high, Boshier saw the entire policy notion of lifelong learning which emerged in the mid-1990s as 'human resource development in drag' (1998, p. 4) – in contrast to the broader, more humane, concept of 'lifelong education' found in the Faure Report (1973). Field (2006) presents a more nuanced account of the emergence and growth of lifelong learning as a concept; but intensifying globalisation and the need to respond to rapid economic change sit at its heart. Different kinds of explanation are to be found in political sociology. Michels (1916) would hardly have been surprised that Labour leaders supported the *status quo*. From similar positions, Miliband (1973), Coates (1975, 2000, 2003) and Panitch (1976) developed a socialist critique of the British Labour Party as never more than 'a party of modest social reform in a capitalist system within whose confines it is ever more firmly and by now irrevocably rooted' (Miliband 1973, p. 376). On this basis, as capitalism evolves, so the Labour Party adapts, but always in a 'functional', supportive way.

The specific form this took in the mid-1990s was 'rebranding' as 'New Labour' after Tony Blair became party Leader in 1994. Initially for electoral reasons (Labour had lost four successive general elections, and won no convincing majority since 1966), 'New' Labour firmly distanced itself from 'old' Labour. But as Blair put it in his May 1997 victory speech, this was not merely an electoral strategy: 'we ran for office as New Labour, we will govern as New Labour'. This 'New Labour'

emphatically rejected the idea that the state should use old-style statist social democratic methods to regulate the market. Instead economic policy had to empower and liberalise the market, not restrict or limit it; the free market, now more than ever, was the means to secure Labour's reformist ends. ... New Labour's economic policy fell within the shadow cast

by Thatcherism, [which had] ... prioritised ... the market in the governance of the economy; privatised and commercialised much of the state sector; marketised a great deal of state-centred activity; boosted financial capital over manufacturing; built a flexible labour market; ... asserted legislative control over trade unions; [and] ... thereby helped further root pro-market, anti-corporatist, anti- (political) trade unionist, anti-public enterprise attitudes into British political life (Heffernan 2011, p. 165).

From such perspectives, we need hardly be surprised by the docile and market-oriented character of the Labour government's *policies* on lifelong learning: by its acceptance of the general international trend, rather than the development of any 'democratic socialist' alternatives – though disappointment that the policies were so ineffective, even in their own terms, must remain. Yet though we may not be surprised by the Labour government's record on lifelong learning, it remains a dismal one; and we should perhaps reflect briefly on the *distance* Labour thinking on lifelong learning had travelled. Policy development for a learning society in England could have drawn on rich traditions in further and higher education, and perhaps especially in adult education. During the twentieth century, these traditions had been particularly strongly entwined with the politics, ideology and thinking of the labour movement, though they had also been widely endorsed on the political right.

The relationship between Britain's labour movement and education was close, arguably symbiotic, especially through the first half of the twentieth century. The Workers' Educational Association (WEA) - formed in 1903, just three years after the Labour Party – thought of itself as 'a partnership of labour and learning' (Cole 1953, Jackson n.d.) Many of the most influential twentieth century Labour politicians studied or taught in WEA classes. When the 1945-51 Labour government enacted much of Britain's 'welfare state', one cabinet member was WEA vice president, and fourteen other ministers (including the Chancellor of the Exchequer), were WEA tutors, former tutors, or executive committee members. Fifty-six members of parliament were active WEA tutors or students. (Stocks 1953, p. 143) This proved the WEA's highest tide; but it was by no means the end of its influence. Two of the Labour Party's commanding post-war figures (Hugh Gaitskell, Leader 1957-62, and Neil Kinnock, Leader 1983-1992) had taught extensively for the WEA before entering parliament. Of Tony Blair's first cabinet, Robin Cook (Foreign Secretary) and Ron Davies (Secretary of State for Wales) had each been full-time WEA tutors for four years (Cook 2007, Davies 2011), while Gordon Brown's Labour Party and personal websites state that his 'first job after graduating [from university] was as a lecturer for the Workers [*sic.*] Educational Association' (Brown 2012).

The WEA's origins were as an association of students in university 'tutorial classes' for adults, acting as a pressure group on universities and government to devote resources to the education of working class adults and children. What its founder – Albert Mansbridge – and early members valued above all was liberal education. This was 'true education': it 'directly induces thought, which permeates the whole of society'. In contrast, most education provided to the working classes promoted only 'unthinking absorption of facts', putting people 'at the mercy of the opinion of the hour, however irresponsible', and leaving them susceptible to 'flights of mere rhetoric.' (Mansbridge 1944, p. 1) Liberal education for adults was thus vital not only for the individual but for the common good – for democracy and, in today's terminology, social cohesion.

Partly because of the WEA's close association with the labour movement, the necessity of liberal adult education became an accepted tenet of policy in England from the First World War to the 1980s. In 1918 'adult education' was defined in legislation as 'subjects of general as distinct from vocational education' (SRO 1919, p. 31), and over the years the term developed connotations of 'specifically liberal education' (Jarvis 2004, p. 44). Churchill's assertion of the importance of liberal adult education, quoted in part at the start of this chapter, shows it was valued on the Right as well as the Left for its political role – sustaining national identity and values – as well as for what it offered to individuals. Liberal adult education had a strong ethos of 'service'; its leading intellectuals having been strongly influenced by the Oxford idealism of T.H. Green and Benjamin Jowett, which 'elevate[e] public service, whether to government, empire, church or community, as the highest ethical and professional imperative' (Goldman 2000, p. 299; see also Steele 1994). Churchill's paean continued:

I have no doubt myself that a man or woman earnestly seeking in grown-up life to be guided to wide and suggestive knowledge in its largest and most uplifted sphere will make the best of all the pupils in this age of clatter and buzz, of gape and gloat. The appetite of adults to be shown the foundations and processes of thought will never be denied by a British Administration cherishing the continuity of our Island life. (Churchill 1953, p. 173)

Until the late 1980s all governments endorsed and funded liberal adult education. The rationale is to be found in a paragraph from the classic report of the Ministry of Reconstruction's Adult Education Committee – a paragraph quoted as 'even more relevant today' by the Russell Committee (Department of Education and Science 1973, p. 4):

We do not wish to underrate the value of increased technical efficiency or the desirability of increasing productivity; but we believe that a short-sighted insistence upon these things will defeat its object. We wish to emphasise the necessity for a great development of non-technical studies, partly because we think that it would assist the growth of a truer conception of technical education, but more especially because it seems to us vital to provide the fullest opportunities for personal development and for the realisation of a higher standard of citizenship. Too great an emphasis has been laid on material considerations and too little regard paid to other aspects of life. (Ministry of Reconstruction 1919, p. 153; Department of Education and Science 1973, p. 4)

Later government reports endorsed the importance of liberal adult education. 'The whole range of evidence' considered by the Ashby Committee (which included Prime Minister Winston Churchill's comments, quoted above), was 'unanimous' that liberal adult education was 'still essential' (Ministry of Education 1954, p. 33): 'adult education students represent in relation to the community at large a social and intellectual asset the loss of which would be deplorable; and we put on record our hope that their genuine educational needs will never go unfulfilled through lack of funds' (Ministry of Education 1954, p. 34).

The character of liberal adult education, and the depth of its connections with Labour thinking, can be seen in two rather different post-war contributions. The first is from the Marxist literature and cultural critic, Raymond Williams. After fifteen years teaching WEA classes, he wrote an *Open Letter to W.E.A. Tutors* in the early 1960s (Williams, n.d.) The Association, he wrote, 'has always stood for

the principle that ordinary people should be highly educated, as an end justifying itself and not simply as a means to power.’ Many people, at that time, thought that as secondary schools expanded, the need for adult education would decline: ‘the exceptional mind in the poor family’ would be ‘spotted young, and ... given a real chance’. But, wrote Williams:

this was never at the heart of the W.E.A.’s purpose. Of course the exceptional minds must get their chance, but what about everyone else? Are they simply to be treated as rejects? The W.E.A. stands for an educated democracy, not for a newly mobile and more varied elite. (Williams n.d.)

The second contribution is from the Russell Report (DES 1973). Despite a background of expanding opportunities both at school and in higher education, which led them to expect *demand* for adult education to increase, they foresaw ‘large areas of unmet need, especially among those little touched by the present provision of adult education’. The ‘urgency of these unmet needs’ was likely to ‘sharpen’. In addition:

The attainment of an acceptable quality of life for all and the development of a free, democratic society require that these demands and needs be met. (DES 1973, p. 3)

The quarter century between the Russell Report and the election of the first Blair government was, of course, largely filled by eighteen years of (increasingly neoliberal) Conservative government (and Labour defeat). Liberal adult education, not to mention Russell’s conception of ‘unmet needs’ and the social priorities they implied, came under considerable criticism. The chief agents of the assault lay, of course, on the political Right – notably Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Education 1981-86, often seen as one of the most powerful ideologues of neoliberal thinking in Britain, who saw ‘education as central to Britain’s economic plight’, was strongly critical of what he called Britain’s ‘anti-enterprise culture’, and ‘relished the idea of challenging it at its heart’ (Harrison 2004). But there were also critics on the Labour side: liberal adult education was by no means the main target of (Labour Prime Minister) James Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech (1976), for instance; but he may well have regarded some collateral damage to it as acceptable.

The ‘Learning Revolution’ Betrayed

The early months of the new Labour government saw a flexing of adult education’s intellectual and political muscles. Within three weeks of taking office as the new Secretary of State for Education and Employment in May 1997, David Blunkett announced he was forming ‘a new Advisory Group on Adult and Continuing Education’, to be chaired by Professor Bob Fryer.⁴ Fryer had long experience of and commitment to liberal adult education. The committee was to ‘give us [i.e., ministers] advice as we prepare a White Paper later in the year’ (DfEE 1997a). Two months later its membership and terms of reference were announced. Members included two WEA officials, representatives of the BBC and the Trades Union Congress, six distinguished academics with deep knowledge of liberal or

⁴ The group, sometimes referred to as the Fryer Committee, was also known by its initials, NAGCELL (National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning).

social purpose adult education, as well as representatives of further education, local education authorities and business.⁵ The group would 'have a crucial role in advising the Government as we prepare to publish our Lifelong Learning White Paper in the Autumn [of 1997]' (DfEE 1997b). Its terms of reference were:

To advise the Secretary of State on matters concerning adult learning as required, and with particular reference to extending the inclusion in lifelong and work-based learning to those groups and individuals whose increased participation will contribute to improvements in employability, regeneration, capacity building, economic efficiency, social cohesion, independent living and citizenship generally; and to make proposals in respect of:

- the preparation of a Government White Paper on Lifelong Learning;
- the strengthening of family and community learning;
- the contribution of further and higher education to adult learning, having regard to relevant recommendations of the Kennedy Committee on widening participation in further education and the national Committee of Inquiry into the future of higher education [two other government committees which had recently reported];
- initiatives for development in the context of the University for Industry; and
- the development of learning towns and cities. (NAGCELL 1997, p. 92)

The Advisory Group issued its first report in November 1997, recommending 'a culture of lifelong learning for all', and specifically:

- a 'strategic framework for the promotion of lifelong learning', to replace existing fragmented and incomplete arrangements;
- a 'fundamental change in attitude', based on a national publicity campaign;
- 'widening and deepening participation and achievement in learning', involving modified funding arrangements and 'systematic outreach and development work';
- 'increased emphasis' on 'the home, community and workplace as key places of learning': this would make use of 'individual learning accounts' and the University for Industry;
- simplification throughout the system, making it easier for learners to take up and continue lifelong learning;
- better 'partnership and greater collaboration' at regional and local levels;
- improved information and advice, incorporating a 'national learning helpline';
- better information to enable target-setting for specific economic sectors;
- effective harnessing of 'new technologies of communication and information', including broadcasting;
- over the following four years or so, 'step-by-step to increase the total volume of funding deployed to support lifelong learning by Government, other public authorities, employers, charitable bodies and individuals themselves' (NAGCELL 1997, pp. 3-10).

This was a substantial agenda for change (though by no means beyond criticism: see e.g. Jarvis *et al.* 1998, for a critique by other adult educators); and a short summary does not do justice to its

⁵ For NAGCELL membership, which changed a little, see DfEE 1997b, NAGCELL 1997, and NAGCELL 1999.

creativity and imagination. Quite quickly, however, significant opposition mobilised within government. The white paper was delayed. Then, *The Times Educational Supplement (TES)* reported (6 February 1998):

The delayed White Paper on lifelong learning has been finally torn up, leaving Government plans to support education from cradle to grave in tatters. David Blunkett ... still backs the lifelong learning proposals. However, the Treasury wants no more open-ended cash commitments before its comprehensive spending review. Mr Blunkett promised the White Paper last May, as the centre-piece of the new Government's commitment to lifelong learning. But publication was postponed at least nine times as civil servants and task groups struggled to make coherent a wide range of commitments to education and industry. ...

A range of promises which would have meant extra cash for further and adult education have now been pushed down the political agenda. The White Paper - which was to have been published next Tuesday - will be replaced by a series of consultation documents, concentrating on the Government's flagship proposals affecting industry. (Nash 1998a)

The same article claimed that the white paper had been 'at the printers ... when the plug was pulled' – though the following week a junior minister denied this (Howells 1998). The same issue alleged the 'torn up' white paper would have included 'a series of initiatives including a special fund to support adult education and a commitment to expand further and higher education by 500,000 places by the year 2002' (Nash 1998b).

The following week, the *TES* returned to the topic, reporting:

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown jointly decided to scrap the lifelong learning White Paper and go back to the drawing board, senior Government sources confirmed this week. [Blair and Brown] ... were appalled by a lack of coherence, the lack of rigour when dealing with standards to be set and the open-ended costs of further education expansion.

One senior official told *The TES*: 'The decision was taken by No 10 and No 11 [Downing Street, the official residences of the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer respectively]. They wanted a paper of some coherence and were not getting it. Also, 500,000 more further education students would add hundreds of millions of pounds to costs next year.' ...

[T]he work done on the paper was completely out of line with Mr Blair's own views, another senior source on a Government taskforce said. 'He (Mr Blair) said there was too much about trying to change the culture of training in Britain and not enough about standards and exams. ... (Nash & Crequer 1998)⁶

Two weeks later, the government published a green – or 'white-turned-green' (Thomson & Tysome 1998) – paper, entitled *The Learning Age* (Cm 3790 1998). According to *The TES*, this was the same

⁶ Elsewhere, the same issue of *The TES* reported that David Blunkett 'is understood to have fought to save the proposals' (Nash, Crequer & Russell 1998).

title as the white paper would have carried. (But the subtitles differed. The white paper, it was reported, would have been subtitled 'Towards a Learning Revolution for the 21st Century' (Nash 1998b); the green paper's subtitle was 'A Renaissance for a New Britain'.) Bob Fryer, chairman of NAGCELL, later commented that although *The Learning Age* had been

launched only after some internal Government wrangling, ... [it] contained what became a deservedly celebrated foreword by Blunkett. The foreword constituted a lyrical and visionary case for the vital contribution of lifelong learning to employment skills, personal and spiritual development, national prosperity, aesthetic life and creativity, civilised values and a sense of community (Fryer 2004, p. 96)

But in Britain a 'white paper' is a statement of government policy, typically leading directly to new legislation. A 'green paper', on the other hand, is a consultation document – an opportunity for the government to make proposals, and receive feedback, but involving few if any commitments. One newspaper reported 'critics' as saying that the consultation exercise 'could mean that it takes the government another year to produce any real and significant policy creating a learning society' (Thomson & Tysome 1998). This prediction proved optimistic: the white paper eventually appeared in June 1999, sixteen months after the first paper had been shelved – and under the title *Learning to Succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* (DfEE 1999).

Renaissance Stillborn

Though its contents may not have matched its 'lyrical and visionary' foreword, or the high hopes invested in the NAGCELL exercise, *The Learning Age* green paper did contain positive ideas, a good deal of rhetoric, and some proposals. Its aim was to develop 'a culture of learning' which would bring benefits for individuals, businesses, communities and the nation. Government would 'help create a framework of opportunities for people to learn' but not to 'force anyone to learn - individuals must take that responsibility themselves'. 'Together we can create a culture of self-improvement and a love of learning' The chief specific commitments were to establish a 'University for Industry' ('Ufi') to 'connect those who want to learn with ways of doing so ... as the hub of a brand new learning network', and to encourage 'individuals, employers and the state' to share the costs of learning. (The state would aim, through its funding, 'to widen participation and increase attainment at all levels where this will benefit society most'; the main specific mechanism was to be 'Individual Learning Accounts'⁷ linked 'in the medium term' to tax incentives or other

⁷ On Individual Learning Accounts, see Smith and Spurling (1995), Schuetze (2007). The House of Commons Committee on Public Accounts (2003, p. 5) reported: 'The Government introduced Individual Learning Accounts in England in September 2000, to widen participation in learning and to help overcome financial barriers faced by individuals. Accounts were to be available to everyone, including the self-employed, and were to be used to help pay for learning of the learner's choice. ...[T]he Government was keen to target people with particular learning or skill needs The scheme was successful in attracting over one million people back into learning. However, in November 2001, a fortnight after announcing the planned suspension of the scheme with effect from December, the Government withdrew it following allegations of fraud and abuse. Total expenditure is likely to exceed £290 million against a budget of £199 million The scale of fraud and abuse could amount to £97 million, including £67 million fraud.'

public funds.) There were also a number of less costly proposals. 'Learning Direct – a new national telephone helpline' would offer advice on 'how to get started and on courses to suit individual needs'. Partnership arrangements and other mechanisms would encourage learning 'at home and in the community', and 'open up access' to further and higher education. Use of 'new broadcasting and other technologies' would be strengthened. Various 'internal quality assurance systems, combined with regular independent inspections against a consistent framework of standards' would raise quality and achievement and reduce student drop-out rates. And there would be a qualifications and credit framework targeted at adults.

Yet it is clear in retrospect that *The Learning Age* represented a defeat for the innovative educational thinking of Fryer's NAGCELL. Its specific commitments were precisely, and *only*, those already announced by Blunkett in his speech appointing NAGCELL:

[W]e will shortly be launching a National Learning Line. This will provide an early impetus towards our aim of a learning society [T]he University for Industry, will engage a range of public and private partners to harness the contribution of modern technology ... to open up opportunities to help adults realise their potential. ... [W]e must help people invest in their own skills Individual Learning Accounts ... will offer a million people the opportunity ... to experience learning, in some cases for the first time since they left school. We will contribute £150 to each account to support those who make a small contribution themselves. We will also encourage employers to contribute to their employees' accounts. (DfEE 1997a)

Indeed, Blunkett and his adult educational band had been forced to retreat to commitments already made before the general election. Labour's 1997 manifesto, *New Labour because Britain deserves better* had endorsed lifelong learning, though in a strongly vocational vein, with none of Blunkett's more 'lyrical and visionary' elements: 'We must learn throughout life, to retain employment through new and improved skills. We will promote adult learning both at work and in the critical sector of further education.' (Labour Party 1997) Its only specific commitments were to individual learning accounts and the University for Industry:

Employers have the primary responsibility for training their workforces in job-related skills. But individuals should be given the power to invest in training. We will invest public money for training in Individual Learning Accounts which individuals – for example women returning to the labour force – can then use to gain the skills they want. We will kickstart the programme for up to a million people, using £150 million ... which could be better used [i.e. reallocating existing funding] and which would provide a contribution of £150, alongside individuals making small investments of their own. Employers will be encouraged to make voluntary contributions to these funds. ...

Our new University for Industry ... will bring government, industry and education together to create a new resource whose remit will be to use new technology to enhance skills and education. The University for Industry will be a public/private partnership, commissioning software and developing the links to extend lifelong learning. (Labour Party 1997)

In short, *The Learning Age* represented a defeat for the creative policy thinking developed by the NAGCELL, and a retreat to the agenda developed by Labour in Opposition.

From 'Intimacy of Connection' to 'Strengthening Employer Voice'

The principal specific proposals in *The Learning Age* can, therefore, be traced back to the Labour Party's election manifesto, rather than to the more expansive thinking of the NAGCELL group. The traditions of community and citizenship learning, of collective learning, and of liberal adult education, had been substantially abandoned. NIACE's commentary reflected this disappointment:

Whilst the [*Learning Age*] paper explores welcome practical steps to be taken to raise standards of achievement, and to revitalise Britain's skills, it has little to say in detail about how learning that fosters citizenship, or respects and celebrates cultural diversity can be developed. ... [In particular, it had] almost nothing to say on the different challenges facing the country in meeting the learning aspirations of people living in its inner cities, or its rural communities, although these will significantly affect the delivery of Ufl; it has little to say about the contribution to be made to the achievement of the vision by Britain's black communities; or about the challenges facing people with learning difficulties in securing an adult curriculum that will support them in exercising their rights and duties as citizens in an informed way. It does not say enough about the learning needs of older people. ... (NIACE 1998)

David Blunkett's foreword to *The Learning Age* had captured the 'intimacy of the connection between creativity, learning, social movements and economic regeneration in his celebration of Victorian working people's ingenuity in using learning to create new social forms', but no policy proposals had been developed which would allow 'that intimacy to be renewed' (NIACE 1998). In particular, 'much more' was needed 'to foster active citizenship':

The Green Paper concentrates on individual aspiration at the expense of what we learn together. It gives too little priority to the important role voluntary organisations can play in the evolution of a learning society. (NIACE 1998)

By its nature, NIACE works with government. It prefers making things just a little better (or just a little less bad) to complete exclusion from policy circles. Its reservations were, therefore, less than strident, and hedged with positives. But regrettably, *The Learning Age* was as good as it ever got for non-vocational adult learning.⁸ The white paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999), NIACE thought 'understated' the challenge:

⁸ A consultation paper, and then a white paper, on 'informal adult learning' were issued under Gordon Brown's administration. Their language was similar to *The Learning Age* a decade earlier. 'Our country enjoys a rich and diverse history of adult education ... This consultation ... will lead to a new vision for informal adult learning for the 21st century' (DIUS 2008, pp. 2-3). The resulting white paper, *The Learning Revolution* (the discarded subtitle of *The Learning Age*), asserted learning was important 'for its own intrinsic value'; it called for 'a culture which values informal adult learning in all its forms, with a wide range of organisations promoting it'

Successive governments' understandable concern with measures relating to the skills needs of the economy has weakened a range of other dimensions of lifelong learning of the sort highlighted in the Secretary of State's introduction to *The Learning Age*. For more than a decade central Government has encouraged Local Education Authorities to ... reallocate money to schools ... [and] cut back on investment in community based adult learning The result has been that for many pensioners, and others whose learning aspirations relate to personal development and cultural enrichment there has been a marked diminution in curriculum offer (NIACE 1999)

As the Labour government matured, so its vision for adult learning became further fixated by the 'imaginary' of global competitiveness. Adult learning policy – indeed, arguably all education policy – was dominated by the Leitch Review of Skills, appointed in 2004 and issuing its final report *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (Leitch 2006) two years later. Lord Leitch, formerly Chief Executive of Zurich Financial Services, recommended 'the UK commit to becoming a world leader in skills by 2020, benchmarked against the upper quartile of the OECD'. This implied a 'focus on economically valuable skills' to 'provide real returns ... in the labour market for individuals and employers', and 'strengthening the voice of employers' (Leitch 2006, pp. 3-4, 138). As NIACE pointed out, this might help individuals whose career aspirations 'are aligned totally with ... their employer For those who have bigger or broader ambitions, things may be harder.' (NIACE 2006)

A different kind of critique – perhaps politically more barbed – might have pointed to parallels between *The Learning Age* and two documents issued in the sunset days of the previous Conservative government. *Lifetime Learning – A Consultation Document* was issued in December 1995 (DfEE 1995); *A Framework for a Learning Society* (DfEE 1996) six months later. Their content shows some uncanny resemblances to *The Learning Age*. There were proposals to strengthen co-ordination in 'investing in the training and development of employees'. Proposals for 'gaining the commitment of individuals to return to and continue learning' included enlisting the support of broadcasters, working with banks to encourage 'career development loans', keeping tax relief and benefit rules 'under review' in order to encourage learning, and 'individual training (or learning) accounts' – though it found 'little support from the financial institutions' for ILAs and it preferred schemes 'run by employers for their own employees'. 'Developing an effective and high-quality infrastructure of information, advice and guidance', would include 'examining the scope for introducing a helpline service'. 'Improving access to learning' should involve encouragement to colleges to deliver courses 'where people live or work' and in 'partnerships with community and voluntary organisations and with employers'. Proposals to give 'people of all ages the opportunity to acquire the basic skills on which to build further learning' focussed on literacy and numeracy in schools, 'family literacy' and 'basic skills training for unemployed adults'. There would be measures to develop 'effective partnerships nationally and locally' - between government, educational providers, employers, trade unions, voluntary organisations and others. These, the document

(DIUS 2009, pp. 4-5). Unfortunately this statement appeared too late to have a significant effect. (The government's emphasis on adult vocational educational had 'led some to suggest' that it did not value informal adult education. 'Nothing could be further from the truth.' (DIUS 2008, p. 2) However, within a 'spending on adult learning' (including vocational) of £4.8bn (DIUS 2008, p. 2), it had 'ring-fenced £210m for informal adult learning' (DIUS 2009, p. 10).)

concluded, would contribute to ‘establishing a society in which learning throughout life becomes a way of life. The Government has taken many initiatives ... [b]ut *responsibility is shared* ... [with] employers, individuals, providers and many others’ (DfEE 1996; emphasis in original).

In most respects, therefore, the Conservative vision of lifelong learning, at least as configured in the mid-1990s, shared most of the same features as Labour’s post-1997 vision. There would be a national culture of lifelong learning, with responsibility (and costs) shared between individuals, employers and government. There would be measures to encourage individuals to commit themselves to continuing to learn – including financial and tax incentives. Better information and guidance, improved access, better basic skills provision, local partnerships: all formed part of both Labour and Conservative policy lexicons.

We suggested above – from the perspective of social and political theory – that we should not be surprised at the Labour government’s acceptance of general international trends on lifelong learning, or at its failure to develop a ‘democratic socialist’ alternatives. In fact, as we have seen, adult educators *did* attempt to develop and deploy an alternative perspective – hardly in the language of democratic socialism, but at the same time clearly distanced from neoliberalism. Those who worked on this were deeply rooted in the politics, ideology and thinking of the labour movement, and drew on rich national traditions of democratic citizenship in adult and lifelong education – yet also innovative thinkers, engaged with contemporary theoretical and policy debates. The evidence shows, however, that this alternative was decisively marginalised in the government’s first two years, supplanted by a set of policies which was, in fundamentals, uncontroversial across the political spectrum.

Conclusion

At first sight this story appears to contradict the view that ‘national context: institutional, political, social, ideological’ shapes how international (and specifically EU) policies are configured in particular countries (Holford et al. 2008, p. 132). The family – genealogical – resemblances are very apparent between, for instance, the European Commission’s white papers *Competitiveness, Employment, Growth* (CEC 1994) and *Teaching and Learning: towards the learning society* (CEC 1995), the British Conservative government’s white paper *Competitiveness: Forging Ahead* (DTI 1995) and its *Lifetime Learning – A consultation document* (DfEE 1995), and the Labour government’s white paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999). All reflect the ‘imaginary’ (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) of neoliberal globalisation, and the role of competitiveness, flexibility and skills in an effective response.

Yet ‘national context: institutional, political, social, ideological’ is about much more than *educational* institutions, politics and ideology. Over its period in government, Taylor argues, ‘New’ Labour ‘embraced enthusiastically the capitalist culture, the drive to individualism and the supposed need to indulge gross inequality’ (Taylor 2009, p. 77). Under Blair, Labour’s traditional language of ‘class and social change’ was supplanted by inclusion and exclusion, the individual rather than the collective, and the permanence of markets. For example, ‘widening and ‘increasing’ participation in higher education and lifelong learning were ‘deliberately elided’ (Taylor 2009, p. 77).

From this perspective, the 'national context' which international policy thinking on lifelong learning encountered in England was shaped principally by core agendas of the economy and electoral politics; the scope for sector-specific (or perhaps, given adult education's marginality, we should say sub-sector-specific) actors was highly circumscribed. Perhaps they had not realised how much the policy game had changed. Ball and Exley (2010) argue that a 'redistribution of policy influence within education policymaking towards informal policy networks' and a 'concomitant marginalisation of traditional "partners" – local authorities, teaching unions and the civil service, and academia – began during the 1980s' with connections between 'right-wing think tanks ... such as the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), the Hillgate Group and the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS)' and the Thatcher government. Under New Labour – in many respects a highly centralised regime – 'the role and significance of Prime Ministerial advisers' led to a 'proliferation of think tank policy networks' (p. 152). 'In some respects,' they suggest, 'think tanks fill a vacuum of ideas created by the depletion or displacement of older policy orthodoxies – both neo-liberal and welfarist' (p. 166).

Four months after its election victory, Tony Blair began his speech to the Labour Party's annual conference in light-hearted mood:

As for Government, well, it beats the hell out of Opposition. They really do say 'Yes, Prime Minister.'⁹ You have to learn a whole new language. They're not in the habit of calling anything a good idea, which given the last 18 years is hardly surprising. When they describe a proposal as 'ambitious,' or, even worse, 'interesting,' what they really mean is they think it was a stupid idea, dreamed up at the last minute for the manifesto. When they describe it as 'challenging,' they mean there's not a hope in hell of making it work. And when they say of a policy 'that it really is quite a brave proposal Prime Minister,' it means they've got the doctor outside waiting to sign the certificates and they've just applied for a transfer to a senior job administering one of our few remaining dependent territories. (Blair 1997)

The irony is that, even as he spoke, a group of adult educators were working on ambitious ideas for building a learning society. Perhaps their proposals were too 'ambitious' and 'brave'; certainly they would have been 'challenging'. Unfortunately, they never got to first base: Blair himself, and his inner circle, had already appropriated the civil service lexicon. When adult educators played the policy game – attempting to colour an emerging discourse of lifelong learning with some democratic citizenship and liberal education gloss – they proved enthusiastic amateurs pitched against professionals: civil servants fresh from eighteen years of Thatcherism, fresh-faced prime-ministerial advisors, think-tankies and policy-networkers, all playing by new rules and destined for New Labour's premier league.

⁹ This is an allusion to the popular BBC television comedy series, *Yes, Minister* (broadcast 1980-84) and *Yes, Prime Minister* (1986-87). 'A benchmark for quietly civilised yet scalpel-sharp political satire' these were 'based on a very simple observation: that for all its claims towards democracy, the British political system is largely run by unelected civil servants who run Machiavellian rings around their supposedly superior masters'. (Brooke n.d.) See also <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesminister/> and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/yesprimeminister/>.

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Table

Table X.1 Current and recent participation in adult learning 1996-2010 by social class

	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2010
Total sample	40	40	42	42	38	43
Social class AB	53	58	60	56	51	56
Social Class C1	52	51	54	51	46	51
Social Class C2	33	36	37	40	33	37
Social Class DE	26	24	25	26	26	30

Source: Aldridge & Tuckett (2011), p. 17. The figures relate to the UK as a whole.