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# Professionalism and the Millbank Tendency:

## The Political Sociology of New Labour's Employees

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## Abstract

This article analyses party employees, one of the most under-researched subjects in the study of British political parties. We draw on a blend of quantitative and qualitative data in order to shed light on the social and political profiles of Labour Party staff, and on the question of their professionalization. The latter theme is developed through a model derived from the sociology of professions. While a relatively limited proportion of party employees conform to the pure ideal-type of professionalism, a considerably greater number manifest enough of the core characteristics of specialization, commitment, mobility, autonomy and self-regulation to be reasonably described as 'professionals in pursuit of political outcomes'.

## Introduction[1]

One of the least researched fields in the study of British political parties is that of party staff, a curious fact given that their importance is almost certainly now greater than ever before. In part, this is because the modern age of election campaigning and political marketing places greater emphasis on paid professional expertise than it does on voluntary activist labour. In addition (and relatedly), parties have come to rely increasingly on paid employees in the context of long-term membership decline and the >de-energization= of local parties (Seyd & Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley et al, 1994; Webb, 1994). This is demonstrated by the changing ratio of central staff to members. In 1964 the Labour Party had one employee for every 2786 individual members, whereas by 1998 there was one employee for every 1231 members, a net change of 56% in the staff/membership ratio. The change is even more pronounced if we narrow the focus to the real locus of staff growth, the central (extra-parliamentary) party organization; in 1964 there was one central party employee for every 16602 individual members, but by 1998 there was one for every 2263 members, a change of 86%.[2] Even allowing for the vagaries of measuring party membership there is no doubt that there has been a substantial increase in the ratio of paid employees to party members, which is to say a substitution over time of paid for voluntary labour.

A single interpretive model which captures something of the shift from voluntary to professional labour is Angelo Panebianco’s >electoral-professional party’ (1988, p.264), but neither this ideal-type nor any of the hitherto available empirical evidence takes the notion of ‘professionalization’ much beyond the growing importance to modern parties of pollsters, advertisers and marketing experts (Hughes & Wintour, 1990; Webb, 1992a; Shaw, 1994). Strangely, well established models drawn from the sociology of professions have been overlooked by political scientists working in this field. In this article we use such models to consider the extent and nature of professionalism within the contemporary Labour Party, in the light of new empirical data, both qualitative and quantitative.[3]

## Defining professionalism

The sociological literature on professions recognizes ‘a continuum of professionalization on which groups can be located according to the number of professional characteristics which they exhibit’ (Romzek & Utter, p.1254). A review of some of the key items in this literature (Wilensky, 1959; Brante, 1990; Raelin, 1991) suggests that the characteristics most usually emphasized include the following:

- *Expertise*: At the heart of the notion of professionalism lies the notion of some special competence which sets the professional apart from other workers. This will most probably reflect a particular education and perhaps formal vocational training or qualification.
- *Autonomy*: In view of the professional’s expertise, s/he tends to be entrusted with an unusual degree of job autonomy; though answerable to the ‘client’, the professional’s specialist knowledge means that s/he cannot be dictated to by line managers. To some extent this distinguishes a professional from a mere ‘bureaucrat’, who is a general functionary under the supervision of a manager.
- *Mobility:* Panebianco (1988, p.227) points out that, by virtue of their expertise and autonomy, professionals are usually in a good position to sell their labour on the external job market if they so choose. Traditional party bureaucrats, however, will typically be engaged in work such that it would be difficult for them to find an equivalent job in the external market; this relative non-transferability of their skills helps explain the bureaucrat’s subordination to line-managers and political leaders.

- *Self-regulation:* Given his or her specialist knowledge, only the professional is in a position to protect clients against entry into the job market of charlatans or incompetents. Hence, a profession will typically have the right to establish and police its own code of vocational ethics. This is readily apparent if one considers the roles of bodies such as the British Medical Association or the Law Society in regulating and disciplining their members.
- *Commitment*: Though an archetypal professional may enjoy a considerable degree of job autonomy, s/he will be expected to display a special level of devotion to the tasks undertaken.

These key characteristics provide us with an ideal-type of professionalism. A professional may be regarded as *a member of the workforce with a relatively high status and strong position in the labour market flowing from a special degree of expertise, commitment, autonomy and capacity for self-regulation which in turn reflects a particular education and formal training*. By contrast, traditional party bureaucrats will have less status, expertise, job autonomy or capacity to regulate their own activities, and are less likely to have been through a special formal education. Given that their status and rewards will usually be lower, moreover, they are less likely to be expected to demonstrate a special devotion to duty. This calls to mind work conducted more than three decades ago by Kornberg, Smith and Clark (1970) on party workers in North America, where they described the prevalence of an amateur ethos, lack of career prospects, low prestige and pay, poor commitment and a lack of any professional reference group among party workers; this syndrome would seem poles apart from our notion of a political professional.

Notwithstanding the foregoing discussion, it is notable how often people use the term ‘professionalism’ in a rather less rigorous sense than we have adumbrated here. Frequently, it is simply taken to mean a relatively high degree of work-place effectiveness flowing from a sense of commitment to work-related duties among employees. This may well go hand in hand with working procedures particularly designed to facilitate such effectiveness. This ‘soft’ notion of professionalism contains some elements from our pure ideal-type (commitment and effectiveness), but lacks the classic elements of specialist training, expertise, autonomy and self-regulation. As we shall see, while professionalism in the classic ideal-typical sense has partial relevance to the story of Labour’s organizational change, professionalism in the soft sense seems to have become far more diffuse throughout the party apparatus.

## Professionalism and Labour Party staff

There are obvious limits to the professionalism of British party employees in terms of the specialist ideal-type. Relatively few are members of self-regulating professional bodies. This reflects a major institutional and systemic constraint which operates in Britain, at least compared to the USA. In America, the candidate-centred nature of politics is such that an extensive profession of political consultancy has emerged which conforms closely to the ideal-type (Sabato, 1981; Thurber, 2000; Thurber & Nelson, 2000); in the UK and most other parliamentary democracies political life remains more party-centred, notwithstanding the encroachment of personality politics, and there simply is not the same scope for such a large autonomous body of political professionals to serve candidates for elective office. In the US candidates are largely free to direct their own election campaigns; in doing so, they hire in the services of professional consultants. By contrast, there is far less sense of a separate campaign being fought in each constituency in Britain as the major parties coordinate national electioneering efforts. Such an approach only requires the professional services of relatively few consultants at the centre, and this limited demand cannot sustain a large professional corpus of independent, self-certifying and regulating political consultants. In the UK, most ‘political professionals’ work independently of parties for lobbying companies.

This is not to say that there is no scope for professionals within parties, however, and indeed, we have seen them becoming far more important in certain spheres of party work for some years now, most obviously in respect of opinion polling, advertising, marketing and PR. This much is well known (Scammell, 1995; Kavanagh, 1995). However, our qualitative research on New Labour revealed another sphere of party work in which specialist professionals have become more prominent: that of fund-raising. Over the past decade, Labour has become less reliant on its traditional financial benefactors, the unions, and has become far more adept at raising money from alternative sources, notably business corporations and wealthy individuals. In 1983, some 96% of all central party income (including General and General Election Funds) could ultimately be traced to the unions (Webb, 1992b, pp.20-22), but within a decade no more than two-thirds could, and by 1997 the figure stood at just 40% (Neill, 1998, p.31). Subsequent developments suggest it has dropped yet further (Labour Party, 1999, p.56). This has largely been achieved through a determined and conscious effort to professionalize the task of fund-raising, something which became apparent with the appointment of Amanda Delew as a consultant to Tony Blair in 1996; the following year she moved from Blair’s private office to Labour’s former headquarters at Walworth Road where she became head of the new High Value Donors Unit, a move which placed her on the party payroll.[4] After 1998, funding became concentrated in the Corporate Relations and Fundraising department at Millbank. These developments resemble the kind of changes which many charitable and commercial organizations have undergone in recent years, and indeed, several of the dozen or so regular employees working in the party’s fundraising department have previous experience in the charitable and commercial sectors. Such an approach has proved especially successful in generating small personal donations as well as the high value contributions which tend to attract greater notoriety; Labour claimed to raise some 40% of its funding from such sources by the late 1990s, with some 70,000 members paying regular monthly subscriptions, and a further 500,000 making ad hoc donations each year (Neill, 1998: 32). A particular success has been the party=s *Business Plan*, established in the late 1980s in order to attract individual donations through activities such as fund-raising dinners; within five years of its foundation, this accounted for nearly one-fifth of the Labour Party=s central income (Fisher, 1996, p.80). These changing financial connections demonstrate graphically the transformation of New Labour at the levels of both political linkage and organizational style, and they illustrate the value to the party of the professionalization of fund-raising.

More generally, what indications of professionalism do Labour staff display? Our first expectation of a professional workforce would be that it would be highly educated and formally trained, a prerequisite for specialist knowledge. Indeed, Labour employees do appear to be unusually well educated (**Table 1**); nearly three-quarters of our sample is educated to first-degree level or beyond. In addition, approaching two-fifths claim to have formal vocational qualifications, a figure somewhat, though not greatly, in excess of the proportion of Labour voters claiming post-secondary vocational qualifications of some type. However, closer examination of the data reveals that the proportion we might think of as conforming to the classic ideal-type of professionalism is more limited than our initial figures on qualifications seem to suggest. Specifically, 19% of respondents have degrees plus vocational qualifications or ‘vocational’ degrees (in subjects such as engineering or law), while a further 19% have post-secondary vocational qualifications but are not educated to degree level. Since this latter group presumably offers prospective employers a lower degree of expertise and enjoys less status, its members are unlikely to be as mobile in the external labour market, and cannot truly be said to conform to the specialist professional ideal-type. The remaining 61% have no vocational qualifications, although the bulk of these (54% of the total) are graduates; thus only a small minority of our sample (9%) lack either a degree or a vocational qualification of some description.

**TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

This analysis suggests, therefore, that less than one-fifth of Labour employees might be described as ‘professionals’ in the most exacting sense of the term, although most respondents have higher educational or vocational qualifications of some type. Of course, it might be argued that the classic ideal-type is not entirely realistic in the context of modern party political employment; a more flexible definition of ‘professionalism’ might suggest that in such a context, a professional is one who has been educated to degree level and then achieved the relevant degree of specialization through on-the-job experience and training. The elements of autonomy, commitment and mobility (though perhaps not self-regulation) remain pertinent to this ‘flexible’ definition. On this basis, our quantitative data suggest that as many as half of Labour’s staff might qualify for the label professional.

We can gain further insight by examining the evidence of vocational mobility, training, autonomy and commitment of party staff. First, do those we might consider to constitute Labour’s professional ‘core’ really enjoy greater mobility on the external labour market? To reiterate, Panebianco argues that job mobility is likely to be a key attribute of autonomous professionals but not of traditional party bureaucrats. Overall, some 60% of our sample have previous non-party work experience, and indeed, many have had more than one previous external job. More to the point, however, our core professional groups are indeed more likely to have external work experience than other less qualified colleagues. **Table 2** reveals that while 71% of vocationally qualified graduates have previous external work experience, along with a similar proportion (68%) of non-vocationally qualified graduates, just 59% of non-graduates with vocational qualifications has and only 25% of those with neither degree nor vocational qualifications. A distinction here seems to lie between graduates and non-graduates, though non-graduates with vocational qualifications do not lag very far behind in graduates in terms of external employment experience. Note too that graduates (both with and without vocational qualifications) are somewhat younger than non-graduates among party staff, something which may well reflect the growth of access to higher education in the UK. This hints at two broad categories of Labour Party professional, an older generation which has had less access to higher education but which is nevertheless vocationally formally qualified, and a younger generation of graduates.

**TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

In general terms the quantitative data on job mobility of party staff are corroborated by qualitative interviews. These point to a clear phenomenon of employees coming to the party for a few years as part of a pattern of career development before moving on to more lucrative external positions, an impression supported by the fact that the average length of paid service for the party among our respondents was 5 years 8 months. In part, this high staff turnover owes something to the relatively ‘flat’ organizational structure of the party which provides few opportunities for long-term career advancement. Nevertheless, while some employees realize that there is little prospect of long-term progression within the party, and most (85%)

feel they could be better paid working externally, many regard party work as invaluable and interesting experience for a defined period of their working lives. This is especially true of those who aspire to political careers in lobbying (described as >the biggest draw= by one unit head at Millbank) or as elected politicians: our survey reveals that 20% of respondents intended to seek future adoption as parliamentary candidates and 11% as European parliamentary candidates. One unit head opined that ‘some people deliberately seek employment in Head Office or at regional level as a basis for promoting themselves as members of parliament’,[5] and it is interesting to observe that British Representation Survey data suggest that some 7% (or 29) of the newly elected PLP in 1997 were former party employees.

As we would expect, the groups we have identified as most likely to consist of political professionals are also more likely to be employed at relatively senior grades within the party (refer again to **Table 2**). This is especially true of the two graduate categories. Note that this holds more strongly for staff at Millbank than those employed in the regional offices; in the latter, 88% of those without degrees have nonetheless made their way to senior grades, whereas only 12.5% of those working at Millbank have done so. To put it slightly differently, 95% of senior Millbank staff in our sample are graduates (23% also having vocational qualifications), while only two-thirds of our regional staff are (21% with vocational qualifications). This tends to suggest that the push for ‘professionalized’ staff may have gone further in the central party organization than in the regions (though note our findings on the development of a professional organizers’ training programme below).

Professionalism is consciously facilitated by the party itself through investing in programmes of staff development and training, and Tables 2 and 3 suggest that such investment is focused on better qualified and higher ranked employees. Thus, the final column of Table 2 shows that the clear majority of staff with formal qualifications (though not just graduates) have benefited from some kind of training by the party, while only a quarter of unqualified staff have. Similarly, **Table 3** shows that training is directed principally at senior staff, especially at Millbank. This table also suggests that the staff involved are highly likely to regard such training as beneficial.

**TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

However, the sub-national party organization has by no means been excluded from the process of professionalization. Thus, local party organizers have experienced notable changes in training as their jobs have become more strategic and reflective than in the past. While the traditional party agent was largely a secretary or administrator to a constituency organization, the modern organizer expects unpaid activists to perform most of the routine work now (a development facilitated by the computerization of party work), while s/he concentrates on developing the membership and fund-raising bases and on local electoral strategies. As the Millbank official responsible for training organizers puts it, ‘the happy amateur who was employed in many constituencies is no more’.[6] This is reflected in the efforts made by Millbank to ‘think long-term’ about the development of the party apparatus through the identification and training of individuals with long-term managerial potential. The purpose of such professional development is not simply, as in the past, to ensure a short-term supply of organizers to constituencies lacking agents in the run-up to an election campaign, but also to ‘change the organizational path of the party’ through the early identification of future regional officers, press officers and Head Office managers.[7] To this end the party introduced, a professional training programme for organizers in May 1999. Initially, 25 recruits were selected from over 300 applicants who responded to an advert placed in the national press. Most were graduates, and they embarked on a mixture of residential training and placements in regional offices and constituencies designed to develop knowledge of the party and its policies, skills in computing, campaigning, public relations and handling the media, communications and opinion-formation, leadership and team work. At the end of the course trainees were formally assessed and awarded a diploma through the Open College Network (Braggins, 1999). Clearly, the development of such specialist knowledge through a mixture of formal training and workplace experience can reasonably be regarded as professional development.

### *The professional ethos*

There is one further aspect of professionalism to which attention should be drawn. It is perhaps less tangible though those discussed so far, though none the less significant since, we would argue, it provides the underlying impulse for the process of professionalization. It is particularly important to the core professional qualities of commitment and autonomy. There is abundant qualitative evidence of the *changing ethos* of the party under since Tom Sawyer became General Secretary in 1994 (Webb 2000: 245). Repeatedly, we were told by staff who had worked for the party though the changes that a remarkable transformation of the workplace culture occurred within Labour=s organization during the 1990s, especially at the centre. Changes in organizational structure were accompanied by a growing emphasis on the need for flexibility, competence, commitment and adaptability among party personnel.

Part and parcel of this new ethos is a strong sense of professional commitment; many interviewees stressed the unusual sacrifices they had to make in order to do the job, and as we have already seen, most were aware that they were foregoing more lucrative opportunities in order to devote themselves to party work, at least for a few years. On the other hand, a number of interviewees felt this was offset by a developing ethos of initiative and autonomy. For instance, one employee emphasized how the party's former General Secretary, Margaret McDonagh, urged staff to be 'entrepreneurs', free to exercise their imaginations even at the risk of making mistakes: 'Don't be afraid to try new things, don't be afraid to fail - from that we go on.'[8] The scope for autonomy which these comments suggest is afforded to (some) staff is entirely consistent with our concept of professionalism, of course.

## Conclusion: party employees in an 'electoral-professional' era

Employees in the contemporary Labour Party are mainly white, middle class, well-educated and young-to-middle aged. Almost all are trade unionists, though only a small (and probably diminishing) percentage have prior experience of paid employment in the union movement. The majority have previous occupational experience outside the party, and turnover in some units is comparatively high; indeed, it may be increasingly common for staff to remain with the party for just a few years in early or mid-career. A significant minority have experienced, or intend to experience, elective office and some may well see their work as enhancing long-term ambitions in this direction.

It would be wrong to imply that professionalism suffuses every aspect of the party's working practices now: neither is it accurate to suggest that every party employee displays all the core characteristics of the ideal-type professional, such as expertise, job autonomy, commitment, vocational identification, a code of professional ethics and membership of a professional body which regulates its members: indeed, no more than a third of our sample have degrees or vocational qualifications, party training and external work experience. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that a more flexibly defined notion of professionalism applies much more widely throughout the party organization. That is, while relatively few display *all* the core characteristics of the ideal-type, many now manifest enough characteristics to reasonably be described as ‘professionals in pursuit of political outcomes’ (Romzek & Utter,1997, p.1263). This is broadly implicit in the growing sense of specialized expertise which party staff in general exude, the substantial if qualified autonomy which some of them enjoy, and the fairly widespread commitment to what might be termed ‘political entrepreneurialism’ found among party employees. These points come through in a number of ways including: the prevalence of academic and vocational qualifications among staff; the external experience that many have before coming to Labour, and the sense that some clearly have that working for the party is in itself intrinsically valuable to their professional development; the capacity enjoyed by some staff to exercise a degree of initiative, enterprise and autonomy; their shared commitment to the underlying goals of the organization for which they work, and the sense that such a commitment could and should entail an abnormally high workload, even though there are significant opportunity costs in working for the Labour Party. We believe that such expertise and commitment can plausibly be defined as a variety of ‘political professionalism’, and that these developments have been driven by a conscious effort to reform the procedures, structures, ethos and training of personnel.

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# Table 1 - Social background of Labour employees compared to other party strata

| Attribute | Employees | MPs | Members | Voters |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***Average age*** | 38 | 47 | 51 | 48 |
| ***Sex*** | | | | |
| **Male** | 53 | 78 | 61 | 46 |
| **Female** | 47 | 22 | 39 | 54 |
| ***Class identity*** | | | | |
| **Yes** | 63 | 65 | 71 | 61 |
| *No* | 37 | 35 | 29 | 39 |
| ***Which class?*** | | | | |
| **Middle** | 56 | 59 | 29 | 25 |
| *Working* | 44 | 41 | 71 | 75 |
| ***Education*** | | | | |
| **Postgraduate** | 20 | - | - | - |
| *Degree* | 51 | - | 21 | 10 |
| *HND/OND* | 3 | - | 19 | 10 |
| *A level/equivalent* | 7 | - | 8 | 12 |
| *O level/equivalent* | 10 | - | 26 | 16 |
| *Other/none* | 10 | - | 27 | 52 |
| Professional/vocational qualifications | | | | |
| **Yes** | 39 | - | - | 32 |
| *No* | 61 | - | - | 68 |
| ***Ethnicity*** | | | | |
| **White** | 93 | 99 | 94 | 94 |
| *Afro-Caribbean* | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| *Asian* | 1 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| *Other* | 4 | 1* | 0 | 1 |
| Union member | | | | |
| **Yes** | 96 ** | 97 | 41 | 26 |
| *No* | 4 | 3 | 59 | 74 |
| Union employee prior to party employment | | | | |
| **Yes** | 13 | - | - | - |
| *No* | 87 | - | - | - |

*Notes:* All figures except for average age are percentages.

* For MPs, this figure is simply the % for 'non-white' respondents.
** For employees, this figure refers to % that were union members before becoming party staff.

*Data sources*: Labour Employees Survey 2000 (n=96); British Election Survey 1997 (n=1367); British Representation Survey (n=180); and Labour Membership Survey 1997 (n=5761). We are grateful to Paul Whiteley and Patrick Seyd for making the latter data set available to us.

## Table 2 – Attributes of different categories of party employees

| **Category of employee** | *% of group with non-party experience* | *Average age* | *% at senior grades* | *Ever received party training?* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Graduates with vocational qualifications | 71 | 37 | 67 | 59 |
| Graduates without vocational qualifications | 68 | 35 | 73 | 52 |
| Non-graduates with vocational qualifications | 59 | 46 | 58 | 65 |
| Non-graduates with no vocational qualifications | 25 | 41 | 40 | 25 |

*Note*: 'Senior grades' are defined here as Millbank employees with a job grade of 28 and above (including party officers and heads of unit) and regional staff with a grading of 27 and above (grade 2 regional organisers, regional officers and regional directors). N=95.

**Table 3 – Training by grade**

| **Grade of employee** | *% having received training by party* | *% of these finding training very/quite useful* |
|---|---|---|
| Millbank senior | 77 | 71 |
| Millbank junior/intermediate | 38 | 83 |
| Regional senior | 63 | 92 |
| Regional junior/intermediate | 57 | 100 |

**Notes**

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[2] For data sources see Webb (2000), p.193 and p.243.

[3] The qualitative data come from interviews with senior officials at Labour's head office at Millbank and the PLP office at Westminster, while the quantitative data derive from a survey of all staff working at Millbank, the PLP and the regional offices. The latter generated a sample of 96 responses (approximately a third of the party's staff establishment at the time of the survey in April 2000), which was broadly representative in terms of its distribution across the grade structure (Webb & Fisher 2001: 6).

[4] Interview conducted at Millbank, 22 November 1999.

[5] Interview conducted at Westminster, 29 February 2000.

[6] Interview conducted at Millbank, 15 October 1999.

[7] Interview conducted at Millbank, 15 October 1999.

[8] Interview conducted at Millbank, 15 October 1999.