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Does New Labour have a Consistent Conception of Social Justice?

Abstract

This article analyses the consistency of New Labour's conception of social justice both discursively and in its application to policy. It begins by illustrating the ways that New Labour has constructed an image of itself as having a consistent conception of social justice. From here, the consistency criteria with which to evaluate New Labour's programme is outlined. Finally, the article applies the consistency framework to New Labour's programme revealing that in addition to being inconsistent discursively, the practical application of the conception of social justice is contradictory to such discourse, thus rendering New Labour's conception of social justice inconsistent.

'Social justice' is conceptualised by Tony Blair in terms of four values: equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community (Blair, 1998, p. 3). The pursuit of social justice is expressed substantially in the government's focus on inclusion, which embraces the

four values. This article analyses the consistency of New Labour's conception of social justice both discursively and in its application in policy. The four values contained within New Labour's discursive conception of social justice are not internally consistent nor are they consistent with each other. Furthermore, the practical application is contradictory to the aims set out in these values. So, discourse and policy are not consistent with one another. The article concludes by outlining the principal factors preventing New Labour's conception from satisfying its consistency claims. The first factor is the unresolved tension between social justice and economic efficiency in providing opportunity for all and the second is the contradictory outcomes produced by an apparently tacit understanding of who or what is included in New Labour's conception of community.

The consistency criteria

The terms of consistency comprise three dimensions. These dimensions outline what a set of ideas would need to exhibit in order for them to be considered consistent. The first dimension asserts that the discourse, which surrounds policy, must be internally consistent and that these ideas must also be consistent with one another. The second dimension states that this rhetoric should matter in terms of informing policy and so the discourse should generate policy that is consistent with it. Finally, resulting policy should not be contradictory to the rhetoric. Thus, policy should not produce outcomes that are contradictory to the objectives set out in its discourse.

It is important to note that this is not simply an exercise in which an external criterion is imposed upon New Labour's programme, that is, a criterion that is not accepted by the government itself. Rather, this article evaluates New Labour's programme on social justice on

terms set by itself. Such an immanent critique is appropriate to New Labour as opposed to other governments because it has a more clearly articulated version of social justice. Indeed, New Labour is unusual compared with previous governments in suggesting that it has a consistent conception of social justice. This raises public expectations about what it can deliver. Claiming that its conception is consistent implies that the policies introduced will work towards achieving an end goal of social justice.

How does New Labour construct an image of itself as having a consistent conception of social justice? New Labour spokespeople assert a range of things about social justice. Yet, we can say with confidence that the government's conception is derived from the ideology of the third way. The third way argues for a pragmatic approach to politics in an age where the old political ideologies of left and right are deemed obsolete and where traditional economic, social and cultural roles have been eroded (cited in Callinicos, 2001, p. 46; Giddens, 1996, p. 13). The third way claims to be able to provide viable solutions to the new set of challenges said to face policymakers. Central to the third way is its diagnosis of contemporary society. This includes its endorsement of the 'hyperglobalist' account of globalisation (see Held et al., 1999, pp. 1–31), the rise of the knowledge economy and increasing individualism (Leggett, 2004, p. 12). This outline of sociological conditions constitutes the foundation of the third way and its values are developed 'post facto' as a functional response to the social change said to have already happened.

This has significance for New Labour's claim to consistency. By foregrounding its conception of values in its assessment of contemporary society, the third way's values of social justice are depicted not necessarily as the best that are available but merely the only ones feasible in the current policymaking environment. Thus, all other conceptions are

deemed unworkable because they fail to take account of the new situation. This does not in itself imply consistency. However, by removing all other alternatives from consideration it establishes itself as the only conception possible. Thus, we can describe New Labour's conception of social justice as consistent because, as the only conception possible, it is obliged to be so.

Further evidence of New Labour's claim to consistency can be found within its discourse. For example, New Labour refers to social justice in the singular. This immediately suggests that New Labour itself sees the conception as being consistent. Moreover, the government has been unusually explicit about what its conception is not. This is a fundamental component of distinguishing itself from the past and establishing the party as 'new'. We are told, for instance, that the government's conception is neither Old Left nor New Right, thus outlining a conception that is negative rather than positive (Blair, 1998, p. 3).

Is New Labour's discourse consistent?

Turning now to analysis of the four values of social justice in relation to the three criteria outlined, consideration must be given to how each of the values of social justice is understood by New Labour, thus addressing the first dimension of the consistency criteria. For purposes of clarity, values are outlined individually but the discussion is structured to reveal the relationship between them. Although this is not stated explicitly by New Labour, the values interact implicitly with one another so that it is only when all four are present that social justice is achieved.

The first value contained within New Labour's conceptualisation of social justice is that of equal worth. Equal worth is recognition of the ability and inherent worth of every individual regardless of background, capability, creed or race (Blair, 1998, p. 3). The third way's redefinition of equality in terms of inclusion means that the principle of equal worth opposes all types of discrimination and seeks to ensure that nobody is left outside by securing the foundation of a just society (Labour Party, 1997). Although the equal provision of basic rights is a necessary part of this, the principle also calls for the resources to exercise such rights. These are to be realised through the equal opportunities provided by New Labour.

New Labour's conviction that all individuals have equal worth underpins the second value of social justice: opportunity for all. This strategy ensures that nobody is left behind in the new global economy while at the same time allowing space for individual motivation and aptitude. New Labour's conception of opportunity is defined in relation to that of the New Right and the Old Left. According to Blair, the New Right's conception of opportunity emphasised too strongly the individual's separation from society whereas the Old Left too readily downplayed its duty to promote opportunities for individuals to advance themselves (Blair, 1998, p. 3). Transcending this, New Labour sees it as its duty to supply equal opportunities, realised through the fusion of economic progress and social justice (Labour Party, 2005, p. 8).

The reconciliation of social justice with economic efficiency is fundamental to New Labour's approach towards achieving social justice. Greater economic prosperity is required for the achievement of greater fairness. In turn such fairness will contribute to increased efficiency and therefore prosperity, thus the relationship between the two is symbiotic (McAnulla and Marsh, 2004, p. 12). The two goals are seen as mutually interconnected with the achievement

of one being impossible without the achievement of the other. The central policy to deliver both of these objectives is that of education. New Labour contends that it is through education that people both secure opportunities to fulfil their potential and gain the skills to ensure they are not left behind in the new economy. This not only improves the skills level of the British workforce, thus increasing economic efficiency but also ensures equal opportunities for all, thus delivering on the government's social justice commitment (Brown, 1994, p. 116; Labour Party, 2005).

To ensure that the cycle of opportunity continues for future generations, individuals are required to fulfil corresponding duties to their fellow citizens and society or face exclusion. By accepting the opportunities provided for them individuals are agreeing to assume responsibility for their own fate. Thus, a prerequisite of the granting of opportunities is the fulfilment of responsibilities for New Labour (Blair, 1998, p. 4). For instance, unemployment benefits will be paid on the condition that those receiving them will be actively seeking work and after the provision of three opportunities for work, these will be removed. The government's role is seen to be providing opportunities for people. It is then up to individuals to help themselves, thus in turn benefiting both the individual and the community (Labour Party, 2005, pp. 8–9). The emphasis on responsibility is part of New Labour's redefinition of citizenship and is seen as the cement in a new social contract. As the cornerstone of a decent society (Blair, 1996, p. 237), responsibility is recognition of the context in which rights are provided. It requires respect for others and so is a precondition of a strong community (Blair, 1996, p. 218). The successful balance between opportunity and responsibility ensures that all individuals are included in a strong and active community. This in turn guarantees equal worth and opportunity for the next generation.

The fourth value of social justice, community, encompasses the values of opportunity and responsibility. Blair contends that individuals prosper best in an active society underpinned by reciprocal rights and duties (Blair, 1996, pp. 299–300 and 1998). Thus, rather than suffocating individual liberty, community has the power to advance it (Blair, 1996, p. 221). It is only within a strong and active community where there is a mutuality of interest and obligations towards one another that both rights and responsibilities can best co-exist (Blair, 1996, p. 218).

Is discourse consistent with policy?

The article now turns to examining New Labour's programme on social justice in relation to the second dimension in the consistency framework: that the discourse on social justice generates policies that are consistent with it. There have been additional moves to implement the notion of equal worth through important initiatives such as the Human Rights Acts and the civil partnership legislation. However, these achievements are offset by measures in other areas such as legislation to combat terrorism and antisocial behaviour. Arguably, the introduction of initiatives in these areas has led to discrimination against, and possible infringement of rights of, some members of society (interview, T. Burchardt, 23 July 2004). Such contradictions suggest that there may be an uneasy tension within New Labour's strategy between on the one hand seeking a 'diverse but inclusive society' (Blair, 1998, p. 12) epitomised in the value of equal worth, and on the other, being seen to be tough on issues that traditionally rank high with the electorate.

The value of opportunity is conceptualised by New Labour primarily in terms of employment and employability. Employment is seen as essential to inclusion (DSS, 1998, p. 3),

‘attachment to the labour market is the key to breaking the vicious cycle of long-term unemployment and social exclusion’ (Commission on Social Justice, 1994, p. 178). In the new global environment it is essential that individuals are both flexible and skilled to ensure that they gain employment and avoid exclusion. By providing lifelong learning opportunities for all, New Labour helps individuals equip themselves for the demands of the new economy. Lifelong learning improves an individual’s employability and thus increases the chance of gaining employment. Employment then ensures inclusion and thus the achievement of social justice. However, although the reconciliation of the two goals through lifelong learning appears consistent, in practice it is problematic. Global conditions have resulted in the promotion of flexibility in employment opportunities. Such flexibility has led to work becoming increasingly fragmented and casual, so generating unreliable earnings from positions originating from the low-paid, lowskilled, service sector (Crouch, 1999; Hutton, 1996; Jordan, 1998). Thus, many people find themselves trapped in low-wage, uncertain employment and therefore excluded despite being employed (Beresford and Green, 1996; Bradshaw et al., 2000; Bradshaw, 2003; Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 1999; Gordon et al., 2000; Townsend, 1979). Providing additional skills training does not alter the type of jobs available and by asserting the inescapability of such developments under the banner of globalisation the government depicts the situation as unchangeable (see Blair and Schroder, 1999). Thus, even the introduction of measures to combat in-work poverty and exclusion – for instance, tax credits (Working Families Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit), minimum wage and targeted benefit increases (Pension Credits and Sure Start scheme) – are insufficient to address this issue, despite resulting in a marked redistribution of wealth towards the worst-off (see Lister, 2000; Sefton and Sutherland, 2005, p. 232). Fundamentally, these policies do not resolve the underlying tension generated by the government’s pursuit of efficiency and its attempt to reconcile it with social justice. Although discursively this reconciliation is

achieved, closer analysis reveals that the achievement of social justice as conceptualised by New Labour in terms of providing lifelong learning opportunities for all is compromised by the accompanying drive to improve efficiency. This is not to say that the two goals may never be reconciled, since convincing arguments and examples from Nordic social democracy show it is possible (see CSJ, 1994; Gough, 1996; Headey et al., 2000; Rhodes, 2005). Nor is it to disregard the enormity of such a task as there are equally convincing arguments for the impossibility of coupling the two objectives (Huber, Ragin and Stephens, 1993; Korpi, 1989; Pierson, 1996). Nevertheless, it is important to illustrate the contradictory outcomes that are being generated by New Labour's strategy. As this article has shown, the government has constructed an image of itself as having a consistent conception of social justice. One element of this conception, opportunities for all, requires the reconciliation of social justice with efficiency. However, in reality, the achievement of social justice is being compromised by the efficiency agenda and so discourse and policy are not consistent.

Much criticism has been made of New Labour's third value of social justice: the notion that rights entail responsibilities (Levitas, 1998; Lister, 2000). Critics argue that responsibilities are only imposed on the poor and when it comes to imposing responsibilities upon the rich the government is silent (Barry, 2005, p. 145; Kettle, 2003; Lister, 1999). One example of this is the different ways that people committing benefit fraud are treated to those who evade tax payments. Millions of pounds are spent on publicity campaigns and the development of specially designated hotlines designed to discourage prospective benefit cheats and to appeal to the morality of others to inform on present cheats. All this is contrasted to the largely invisible investigations that go on into tax evaders, where identities are often kept confidential and offenders are given a second opportunity to repay the money (Barry, 2005, p.

149; Powell, 2000, p. 47). Thus, responsibilities are not imposed evenly across the population.

A fundamental component of the value of responsibility is the notion of individual responsibility. New Labour attaches to the provision of opportunities an accompanying demand for duties. If individuals fail to fulfil their duties then it is acceptable for them to be excluded. Exclusion is seen as acceptable if it is a consequence of either poor judgement³ or failure to fulfil duty. Yet this sits uneasily with the government's focus on tackling exclusion specifically in light of the central role that inclusion plays in New Labour's conception of social justice, where the realisation of social justice has taken the form of the pursuit of social inclusion (Blair, 1998, p. 12; Shaw, 2003, p. 8). This suggests there may be a conception of community implicit in the government's discourse that does not sit easily with New Labour's account of equal worth. Nonetheless, this discursive inconsistency has led to policies that contradict the aims set out in the value of responsibility.

Conclusion

This article has argued that New Labour's conception of social justice is consistent neither discursively nor as applied in its policy choices. This contention will now be justified by demonstrating how the government's conception fails to satisfy each of the consistency criteria outlined above.

Firstly, the four values of social justice identified by the government – equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community – appear to be compatible with one another. However, closer analysis of the value of responsibility reveals that the government may have

an implicit understanding of community, and specifically who is included in that community, that conflicts with the value of equal worth as it is set out in its conceptualisation of social justice. This understanding enables New Labour to accept the exclusion of some individuals from its 'community' if they fail to fulfil their duties to society, thus calling into question the compatibility of the values of social justice with one another.

In terms of internal consistency, again it is the value of responsibility that is problematic. The requirement to fulfil duties as a condition of the receipt of opportunities is in tension with the government's conception of social justice because it sanctions exclusion in the event that a duty is not performed. New Labour's conception of social justice suffers from an unresolved tension between the notion of individual responsibility and the objective of achieving social justice through inclusion. This has the effect of rendering policy inconsistent with discourse because a central platform of New Labour's policy has been the commitment to tackle exclusion.

While the value of equal worth is employed consistently at the level of discourse its application at the level of policy is less so: some policy choices, such as the Human Rights Act and the civil partnership legislation are consistent with the discourse, but others, such as the anti-terrorism legislation, are not. Finally, in its discursive formulation, the value of opportunity rests upon the government's claim to reconcile the goals of social justice with those of economic efficiency. However, this claim is not delivered in its practical application and so policy is inconsistent with discourse.

Notes

1 Although first introduced under the Major government, this reform has been continued and pursued with fervour by New Labour.

2 Blair argues that in previous definitions of citizenship there was no conception of responsibility: ‘Social Democrats in Britain and the United States who held a liberal view of the “permissive society” divorced fairness from personal responsibility. They believed that the state had an unconditional obligation to provide welfare and security. The logic was that the individual owed nothing in return’ (Blair, 2002). However, he has been accused of constructing a ‘straw man’ of welfare provision (see Barry 2005, p. 151. For the implications of this see Lister, 1990; Plant, 1998). Thus, it has been argued that New Labour conceives citizenship narrowly (see Powell, 2000).

3 The introduction of the element of individual responsibility raises questions about how far a person can be held responsible for the consequences of their actions. Factors such as the background conditions of the individual may have influenced the decision that was taken. For example, someone with a low income may decide to take a job that pays slightly higher wages than another even though less job security is offered. Some authors have sought to develop this notion so that it reads that people cannot deserve any benefits arising from their decisions on the basis of features for which they are not responsible and which are not possessed equally by everyone (Sher, 1987, ch. 2). How can this ever be determined? Surely, it can always be assumed that the outcomes of particular decisions have been affected by factors for which people are not responsible, for example natural abilities, education, parental influence, friends; the list is endless (Miller, 1997, p. 91). Yet, if we ignore such factors individuals may be subjected to a life of hardship or worse on account of reasons that are and always have been out of their control. Thus, as a basic we need to consider things such as the adequacy of information for outcomes of decisions and analyse this alongside our knowledge

that at any given time people will only have certain mental and physical capacities and this cannot be transformed no matter how much effort is put in (Barry, 2005, p. 137).

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