Unlocking the talent of every citizen: debates about potential and ambition in British socialist thought

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Introduction

This chapter considers how British socialist and social democratic thought from the late nineteenth century to the present has treated the objective of helping people to fulfil their potential, talents and ambitions. Such an objective was, on the face of it, a central and relatively uncomplicated pillar of socialist thought: socialism claimed to stand for ‘ordinary people’ and an important part of this was seen to be about helping them to develop themselves in ways which they were constrained from doing by what was perceived to be an exploitative economic and social system. This meant increasing people’s access to education, skills, the arts and leisure. It also meant seeking to broaden their moral and ethical horizons, partly as it was thought that this would make for more fulfilled and happier individuals, and partly because ethically minded and cooperative citizens were seen to be required for an ethical and cooperative (and by that was meant socialist) society.

Such an objective did indeed constitute a significant strand in socialist thought throughout the period discussed in this chapter, though in a wide variety of different forms. However, the chapter suggests the picture was also considerably complicated by several further influences and constraints. One was that there was often a wide gap between the socialist vision of a citizenry well provided for in terms of educational and cultural opportunities, and with a strong appetite for such opportunities, and the more prosaic reality. Another was that given the extent of the obvious and often dramatic material poverty people were enduring, especially in the earlier periods covered by this study, there was a general feeling, shared by some socialists themselves, that this tangible poverty of income, housing or health, or the flawed economic system that was claimed to have partly caused these problems, needed to be addressed before less tangible or more

'advanced' educational, cultural or 'psychological' improvements could be embarked upon. As socialists became increasingly familiar with the nature of people's lives and their (sometimes in socialist eyes limited) aspirations as they really were, they differed in their analyses and responses. Some, in the 1920s and 1930s, concluded that there might be genetic limits to people's ability to develop more 'advanced' levels of culture and intelligence. Others, more optimistic, in the 1950s and 1960s, saw an expansion of cultural opportunities and a move to comprehensive secondary education as ways in which people's opportunities could be enhanced and their horizons broadened.

Since the mid-1980s, socialists have focused ever more strongly on the issue of people's ambitions and talents as they have battled with the political right for the electorally rewarding association with concepts like social mobility, opportunity and 'getting on', and as individuals' expectations about what they can achieve, learn and enjoy have risen. Socialist assessments of the best means to liberate people's potential have also changed. Many now see education policy as being more important than nationalisation in enhancing people's life chances, and, more broadly, see the fulfilment of talent as depending on changes in attitudes, culture and behaviour as much as in economics, institutions and social structures. Yet disagreement remains among socialists as to how best to empower people to develop their potential. So does a sense that ultimately the socialist view of 'achievement' and 'ambition' is not the same as, and may at times be in opposition to, some contemporary definitions of those concepts in terms of becoming wealthy or famous, or achieving elevated status within a competitive framework.

Some existing historical research is relevant to the theme of this chapter. Rodney Barker has analysed the Labour Party's approach to educational issues in the first half of the twentieth century (Barker 1972). Steven Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo have explored Labour's perceptions in the 1940s of the limits to both people's political idealism and their enthusiasm for cultural 'enlightenment' (Fielding *et al.* 1995). Lawrence Black examined the impact of cultural and social changes during the 'age of affluence' in the 1950s and 1960s on socialist attitudes towards popular culture (Black 2003). David Marquand has written on the ways in which post-war socialist thought has fluctuated between seeing people as passive recipients of welfare on the one hand and active public-spirited citizens on the other (Marquand and Seldon 1996). Finally, my own research discussed how far the Labour Party's visions of socialism and equality since the 1930s entailed changes in the values and attitudes of society and citizens, and in their educational opportunities. It also considered how these ethical, psychological and educational dimensions interacted with

other parts of Labour's agenda focused on economics, social structures and power (Nuttall 2006). All this work raises issues connected to that of people's potential. This chapter seeks to make a start on considering the subject of potential systematically in its own right.

It suggests that the topic is worth investigating for three reasons. First, it shows how the socialist agenda has to some degree shifted over the twentieth century from seeking to combat *negatives*, such as unemployment, poor housing and low incomes to encouraging *positives*, that is people fulfilling their ambitions and potential through, for example, education, careers they find rewarding or voluntary work in their communities. At the same time, though, combating 'negatives' has remained central to socialist thought. Second, a central aspect of political debate in modern British history has been disagreement about how much people's natures, achievements and unfulfilled hopes were due to, in turn, unalterable genetic character traits, effort (or the absence of it) or the influences of their various social environments, influences which could be improved through social change. This chapter seeks to cast light on the impact of these rival interpretations. This is important, not least because the very assumptions by socialists, and others, about what people could and could not achieve, may themselves have been a factor shaping people's chances of fulfilling their potential, whether in terms of the influence of those assumptions on policy, or their less tangible impact on people's expectations of themselves. Finally, the chapter concludes by arguing that Gordon Brown's party conference speech in 2007 represents something of a landmark in British political history in the extent to which it placed the idea of encouraging people's talents and ambitions at the centre of his political vision. It also points to some ways in which an emphasis on encouraging the development of people's potential, talents and ambitions has been, and can continue to be, of substantial benefit to socialists, in terms both of helping them to win elections and achieving some of their deepest objectives of equality and empowerment.

Two brief points about definitions should be made. I have defined socialist 'thought' broadly to include reflections by Labour politicians on how ideas ought to be modified due to practical experience. And I have used whichever of the labels 'socialist' or 'social democrat' tended to be used by the person or in the period I am discussing, thus usually 'socialist' for most of the period, and both terms in relation to the late 1990s onwards.

The 1880s to 1931

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century socialist thought generally retained a large measure of Enlightenment and Victorian optimism about the continuing progress of society through reason. There was also a belief

that a socialist restructuring of the economy and the pursuit of the moral, educational and cultural 'uplift' of the citizenry would be mutually reinforcing. From this perspective, socialism existed both to combat material poverty and to provide new opportunities, time and encouragement for people to develop themselves educationally and psychologically beyond their formerly prescribed roles in the industrial production process. The Fabian Sidney Olivier, in his chapter on the moral basis of socialism in *Fabian Essays* (1889), contended:

The existence and stability of society are the indispensable guarantee for the general satisfaction of the primary desires of individuals . . . but much more are [they] indispensable conditions for the common birth and satisfaction of the secondary desires, the desires which have created all that is most valuable in civilization and which find their satisfaction in art, in culture, in human intercourse, in love. (Shaw 1962: 145–6)

This meant that the 'schools of the adult' must include libraries, opera, drama and museums (Shaw 1962: 160). Ramsay MacDonald complained in 1905 that society had failed to 'enrich all its classes', not only with material possessions, but with 'character and capacity to employ leisure time' (MacDonald 1905: 8). Harold Laski's *A Grammar of Politics* (1925: 56, 88) called for people to be released from 'material and spiritual' servitude alike, and argued that the state existed to enable people to realise the best in themselves:

A State which builds, for example, an educational system which regards its citizens, not as helots, but as men, in which, as Plato desired, the Minister of Education is more important than the Minister of War, can at least mould conclusively an environment in which an appreciation of the best lies open to its members. (Laski 1925: 27–8)

Socialists, then, believed that under changed social conditions, people themselves would change. They would be stronger of character, more cooperative and more fulfilled in their leisure, cultural pursuits and work. It was judged that even if some people had limited horizons and aspirations under existing exploitative conditions this did not mean that this was their 'natural' and permanent psychological outlook. Rather, they had been constrained by the limits imposed on their opportunities and expectations. Higher aspirations and new skills could be learned through habit and training. Writing in *Justice* on 16 June 1894, William Morris emphasised that 'it must be remembered that civilization has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for any life much better than that which he now endures perforce' (Morton 1984: 245). In a lecture entitled 'The society of the future' seven years earlier, Morris revealed how wide a range of skills and attributes he believed

people could develop if freed from society's existing division into property-owners and property-servers, and from the division of labour itself:

All people should learn how to swim, and to ride, and to sail a boat on sea or river; such things are not arts, they are merely bodily exercises, and should become habitual in the race . . . Then again there are things like cooking and baking, sewing, and the like, which can be taught to every sensible person in a few hours, and which everybody ought to have at his fingers' ends. All these elementary arts would be once again habitual, as also I suppose would be the arts of reading and writing; as also I suspect would the art of thinking, at present not taught in any school or university that I know of. (Morton 1984: 197)

Some other socialists were at pains to emphasise that their desire to equalise educational, cultural and economic opportunities did not necessarily mean they believed all had equal capacities. R. H. Tawney, for example, influenced by psychologist Cyril Burt's research on the distribution of educational abilities, argued in 1931 that 'the fact that . . . individuals differ widely in their natural endowments, and in their capacity to develop them by education, is not open to question' (Tawney 1952: 36). What was important, nevertheless, was that 'whether their powers are great or small', everyone should 'be equally enabled to make the best of such powers as they possess' (Tawney 1952: 35–6). Education was a central part of Tawney's socialism, whether through his activities for the Workers' Educational Association or his writings, and he emphasised in 1924 his belief that it was 'an instrument of social improvement the potentialities of which are as vast as they are at present neglected' (Tawney 1924: 3).

Here was a vision of socialism, then, that saw equality as incorporating not only the reduction of material deprivation, but also the expansion of opportunities for intellectual and psychological growth. However, this broad aspiration for the fulfilment of citizens' intellectual and psychological potential was not always at the top of socialists' list of priorities. Nor was it always matched by a detailed appraisal of how it might be carried out. One reason for this was that the socialist focus on what they saw as the progress of society as a whole sometimes meant that it devoted less attention to what might be the aspirations and psychological make-up of individuals. This was perhaps especially evident in the Fabian tradition, where 'potential' was connected to a strong emphasis on social efficiency (sometimes ahead of an ethical, idealistic or psychological agenda). Thus, for example, Sidney Webb argued in 1889 that 'the perfect and fitting development of each individual is not necessarily the utmost and highest cultivation of his own personality, but the filling, in the best possible way, of his humble function in the great social machine' (Shaw 1962: 90).

A further reason for the limits to systematic socialist attention to the

issue of the development of people's talents and potential in its own right was the tendency to see change in the structure of the economy as the prerequisite for improvement in people's intellectual and cultural opportunities. For Olivier, 'the most important influence in the repairing of social morality may perhaps be looked for not so much from the direct action of . . . elements of the higher education [such as libraries, museums and the arts] as from those very socialist forms of property and industry which we believe to be the primary condition for allowing such higher education to affect the majority at all' (Shaw 1962: 160). Similarly, though Ramsay MacDonald saw the ultimate aims of socialism in moral and intellectual terms, for practical purposes he defined socialism as being about economic and industrial reconstruction. Psychological changes in the citizenry would follow from changes in the economic structure: as the communal organisation of industry 'becomes more efficient, the individual will respond with more intelligence and more character' (MacDonald 1905: 130, 185). Important too was the fact that in a late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century society of such evident poverty in terms of incomes, health, housing and urban environment the idea of tapping the depths of everyone's individual intellectual and other talents seemed a remote, and to some even an indulgent objective. Partly reflecting this, as Barker notes, the attention given to the issue of education by the Labour Party at a national level before the 1950s was sometimes rather spasmodic, though it was a more central concern at the local level (1972: 12, 97).

From 1931 to 1979

As the twentieth century developed, socialist understanding of the issue of people's potential changed in several ways, although a certain similarity in the overall pattern persisted through the century, and remains today – the philosophical commitment to releasing the full talents of people combined with an uncertainty about what this meant, or how to come even close to achieving it in a purportedly hostile social and political environment. One change was a growing sense of the disparity between theoretical socialist perspectives as to what people, given the fullest opportunities and encouragement, could become and what they actually *were* under existing social conditions. There were several different interpretations of this difficulty. Some were relatively gloomy. Under the influence of the post-First World War reaction, especially in academic psychology, against the apparent over-optimism of the Victorian faith in the onward march of reason, not least as evidenced by the mass slaughter of that war, the early socialist revisionist Evan Durbin reflected in the 1940s that intellectual education was 'not the panacea I used to be told that it was', and that 'about half

the population – could never do more than pass into the Universities – or attain beyond the mental age of 16 only' (Durbin Papers: 4/7). Eugenics, more commonly associated with the far right, but seeming to some on the left to be a straightforward way of maximising the overall 'mental quality', as distinct from the racial purity, of the citizenry, were especially prevalent among Marxists and Fabians, and those socialists with scientific interests (Paul 1984: 567–8).

Other socialists were more hopeful, arguing that it was not surprising that people's intellectual and moral horizons were often limited, given their prescribed place at the bottom of a hierarchically organised society. Leonard Woolf, writing in 1931, emphasised the need to see people's evolution in a longer time scale than did those socialists expecting either democracy or revolution to bring an overnight improvement in citizens' mentalities:

It is difficult to find anything to bolster up the pessimism of those who do not like democracy. If the mass of the human race went forward one thousandth part of the distance that it has travelled since history began, when our forefathers were hardly as civilised or intelligent as are our dogs and cats today, the whole population would consist of Socrateses, Christs, Shakespeares, Newtons, and Beethovens . . . From what we know of history there is not the slightest reason to believe that it is impossible for the man in the street to become in a few hundred years as cultured and intelligent and politically sagacious as any member of the present Cabinet . . . Contemporary culture is the culture of masses just emerging from the barbarism to which they were condemned by aristocracy. (Woolf 1937: 213–15, 217)

Perhaps the dominant reaction of leading British socialist figures from the 1940s onwards, as socialism moved from being a movement of protest and aspiration to one of government and power, was to focus on some of the specific practical ways in which new services might be provided, and society, the economy and institutions be reorganised, so as to increase people's cultural and educational opportunities. Policy on culture and the arts was one such area. As Lawrence Black has illuminatingly shown, the 1950s and 1960s provided an interesting historical moment at which to view socialist ideas about culture, and about how they should interpret and react to the state of popular culture (Black 2003). A wide range of social and cultural developments were taking place in this period which are sometimes too readily conflated to support simple narratives of cultural decline or progress, including: increasing material affluence; greater access to education, information and travel; relaxation of laws relating to personal morality and artistic freedom; elements of cultural commercialisation and Americanisation; the provision of a greater choice of cultural and leisure activities; and a reaction against Victorian ideas about character and sexual restraint. In different ways these developments were perceived to

generate both constraints and opportunities for socialists who themselves had differing visions of how the cultural and artistic potential of people could be unlocked. Some, for example, had concerns about what were perceived to be the cultural (and the consequent political) implications of a growing materialist consumerism. To Raphael Samuel, writing in a *Fabian Tract* in November 1959, 'Labour's primary task is to create a climate of socialist and radical opinion to oppose the ethos of the acquisitive society' (Fabian Society 1959: 35). The leading Labour left-wing figure at this time, Aneurin Bevan believed the working class had been seduced by consumerism. He even wondered if this was irreversible, telling Geoffrey Goodman during the 1959 election: 'History gave them [the working class] their chance [to embrace socialism] – and they didn't take it. Now it is probably too late' (Campbell 1987: 364).

Others, especially the liberal revisionist socialists, saw some more positive signs in contemporary cultural trends. Surveying the state of popular culture in 1962, Tony Crosland concluded:

There is surely no evidence of a decline in popular cultural taste . . . The level of intellectual inquiry has manifestly risen. The notion of the nullifying, deadening influence of the media must seem strange to anyone accustomed to violent family or public-house arguments about newspaper articles or television programmes. And the theory of the passive, captive audience seems equally eccentric in the light of the intense and active family life in working-class areas with its immense range of hobbies, do-it-yourself activities, gardening, house-repair, and (the greatest change of all), family travel. (Crosland 1962: 201)

Even by the standards of what some saw as 'high culture', revisionists were encouraged by evidence of greater popular interest. Douglas Jay, for instance, reflected that attendance at 'serious' concerts by 1962 was far greater than before 1939 (Jay 1962: 350).

On the question of what, if anything, socialists should 'do' about culture, the revisionists tended to take a threefold approach. They were keen that those who had been denied the opportunity to enjoy such middle-class- or intellectual-associated pursuits as concerts or art galleries should have more opportunities to do so. At the same time they believed, on the grounds both of personal freedom and the need to avoid the appearance of preaching (not least because it could be electorally damaging for socialists), that the state and politicians should not be prescriptive about people's cultural and leisure pursuits. Finally, they also judged that the idea of ranking cultural activities was far too simplistic, partly because they themselves enjoyed activities from both the supposedly 'high' and the supposedly 'low' brow. Crosland, for instance, made much of his fondness for watching 'Match of the Day'. Gaitskell's comments in 1956 sum up the overall revisionist analysis:

To me the pursuit of happiness has always seemed such an individual and personal matter that it is in the main best left to people themselves to decide, though evidently their capacity for making wise decisions in these matters is limited, if they have never been given the chance to appreciate a concert as well as a football match. What the State should do is to provide the framework, the opportunities through which people have the best chance of finding happiness through themselves. (Gaitskell 1956: 4)

Education was a second area where socialists could develop specific policies that might impact upon the development of people's potential. The movement to comprehensive secondary education and the expansion of higher and further education in the 1960s lay at the heart of this. The 1943 Norwood Report had argued that there should be different types of school for different types of mind, an argument implicitly accepted by the 1944 Butler Education Act. But the resultant division of secondary education into grammar schools for those taken to be more academic, and secondary moderns for the remainder, was challenged by psychological and sociological research in the 1950s, which suggested that there existed a too often untapped reservoir of ability among those not attending the grammar schools. This was drawn on by socialists, notably Tony Crosland. In his *The Future of Socialism* (1956), the leading statement of 'moderate' post-war British socialism, Crosland argued that both education and the expansion of cultural and leisure opportunities should become more central parts of the socialist and progressive agenda, as primary material poverty faded and as socialists realised that nationalisation was not the panacea some of them had once thought. Furthermore, as Secretary of State for Education between 1965 and 1967, Crosland was to implement a national policy of movement towards comprehensive secondary education. Referring to the academic research mentioned above, Crosland claimed in 1962:

We now know that measured intelligence is *not* a purely innate characteristic; it is at least partly an acquired one. With this knowledge, the whole discussion of 'equal opportunity' takes on a new aspect . . . Intelligence is acquired by teaching, stimulation and encouragement; and the amount of these available to the child will vary with social background . . . The 'strong' definition [of equality of opportunity, which Crosland favoured] is therefore that, granted the differences in heredity and infantile experience, every child should have the same opportunity for *acquiring* measured intelligence, so far as this can be controlled by social action. (Crosland 1962: 172–3)

Parents' expectations for their children's education rose in the 1950s and 1960s in line with the general increase in social mobility, as well as the beginnings of a realisation that employment in traditional manufacturing jobs could no longer be so heavily relied upon as an alternative to gaining other skills and qualifications. Crosland's predecessor as Education

Secretary, Michael Stewart, reflected that whereas ‘in the 1940s parents would ask that their child be allowed to leave school before the statutory age in order to take a job’, ‘by 1970 such requests were unknown’ (1980: 257). Both citizens’ and socialists’ expectations of the potential of educational reform had, by the 1970s, risen to the extent that Shirley Williams, Education Secretary during Jim Callaghan’s premiership, could visualise the role for comprehensives as being ‘to transform the country from one in which few children went on to higher education to one in which most children would seek university or technical qualifications as their natural goal’ (Williams 1996).

However, research and policy experience were also now beginning to point to a more multilayered understanding of the complex psychological constraints on educational progress. Crosland noted in 1962:

A child’s vocabulary, its interest in its surroundings, its very ability to perceive, are conditioned by its early family life; the less educated the parents, the less these will be stimulated . . . Parents who themselves left school early are more likely to persuade their children to leave school early. The fact of early leaving, since IQ is partly a function of the amount of education, still further increases the gap between children from different backgrounds; in other words, the child from the less fortunate background is penalized at a series of successive stages – and its own children will be penalized in the next generation . . . [This points to the need for] a major educational revolution, so that parents, having been properly educated themselves, will stimulate the faculties of their children. (Crosland 1962: 172–3)

In contrast to both high socialist hopes for an immediate transformative impact from educational expansion, and Conservative criticisms of the perceived failure of comprehensives rapidly to deliver this promised educational improvement, the implication of Crosland’s analysis was that the process of developing people’s educational potential could be a long one, given the challenging task of breaking through the cycle of low educational expectations transmitted through parents from one generation to the next. The sociologist A. H. Halsey, who had also been Crosland’s educational adviser, even suggested in his 1977 Reith Lectures that the relationship between parent and child had been ‘of greater moment in changing the character of the learning process among children than all the expansion and reorganization of schools which has gone on since the Education Act of 1944’ (Halsey 1978: 109). Others did not go this far, but Crosland himself conceded in an interview with George Gale in April 1974 that research now indicated that ‘we were inclined, 20 years ago, to exaggerate the effect of education, taken alone, on people’s life chances’ (Crosland Papers: 13/20, 327).

There was a growing feeling that the move to comprehensives had not

fully met the expectations of dramatic educational progress that some of their supporters had expected. Critics also highlighted the poor discipline in some schools and claimed that mixed ability teaching provided insufficient stimulus for pupils to improve. Consequently, the argument was increasingly voiced from the 1970s that the brand of educational egalitarianism practised by Labour governments was not advancing, or was even constraining, those people who aspired to improve and push themselves. This was accompanied by the broader contention that high taxation and state provision were 'crowding out' entrepreneurial talent and reducing incentives to develop oneself. One of the leading intellectual exponents of New Right thinking in the 1970s, Keith Joseph, insisted in his book *Equality* (1979) that egalitarianism appeared to legitimise resentment of talent (1979: 56, 125). Yet such criticism was not confined to the right. It was also beginning to be made from within socialist circles, especially revisionist ones. One young revisionist, John Mackintosh, suggested, in a 1978 article dramatically entitled 'Has social democracy failed in Britain?', that those taking the Croslandite egalitarian position would now have to pose themselves questions such as:

Does equality mean that within one comprehensive school there should be no streaming according to ability or even no examinations? If so, does there come a point where the lack of any indicators of ability or effort militates against the working class child with no connections? (Mackintosh 1978: 269)

Socialists were no longer as confident as they had been in the seemingly simpler times fifty years earlier that they knew straightforwardly how to liberate the potential of ordinary people. And the then apparently indisputable claim that socialism or labour movements stood for the ambitions and upward mobility of 'ordinary people' was now increasingly strongly contested by the right.

There was also a related argument about whether post-war socialism had demanded a sufficiently active role for citizens. Focused as it was on extending and dispensing welfare provision *for* people, it had, some friendly critics now claimed, spent too little time reflecting on what might be expected *from* them. This criticism was most starkly articulated by the Jenkinsite revisionist David Marquand in his 'Inquest on a movement', published in *Encounter* in July 1979. He argued that what he saw as post-war statist Fabian social democracy had drawn too little from the New Liberal tradition's emphasis on moral persuasion and individual autonomy. Social democrats 'seemed more anxious to do good to others than to help others to do good to themselves' (1979: 9–11). In the sphere of mainstream practical Labour politics, Jim Callaghan reflected that he had learned by the 1970s that 'it is not enough to enforce changes in the economic structure

to ensure the fulfilment of ideals. These require changes also in human attitudes and relationships' (1987: 396).

As historians, we should be wary of analyses that carry this too far and use the stick of hindsight to beat the socialism that stretches from the 1940s to the 1970s. In those decades, the state did seem to most socialists, and many progressives who were not socialists, to be an important instrument for empowering people by providing them with a wide range of securities and opportunities not available to them before. There would be few even on the political right who would dispute that some of the extensions of state activity in the spheres of health, education, housing and social security had a significant enabling impact upon people's lives. Equally, though, there was to be increasing agreement among socialists from the mid-1980s onwards that socialism must make a renewed effort to show that it was on the side of aspiration, mobility and talent, and not only social justice and compassion. There was a feeling also that what was a rather masculine and white labourist and socialist culture should devote more attention to the potential of women and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, this revised socialist vision for releasing people's potential increasingly explored issues such as participation, attitudes, behaviour, culture and what was actually occurring in public services on a detailed micro-level, and did not only concentrate on large-scale economic, social structural and institutional changes.

From 1979 to the present

The political pressure of repeated electoral defeats after 1979 allied with socialist intellectual reflection to produce this stronger emphasis on aspiration. Labour lost significant numbers of skilled and 'upwardly mobile' working-class voters to a Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher which emphasised its offer of wider home- and share-ownership and a new culture of entrepreneurship. Bryan Gould recalls his belief in 1983 that the Conservatives rather than Labour were seen as 'the liberator of working-class ambitions', and that 'Labour could not hope to be re-elected if we allowed ourselves to be seen as a party which stopped people from doing things, which prevented them from realising their aspirations' (Gould 1995: 152). Labour's problem had been, Tony Blair asserted in his party conference speech of 28 September 1999, that 'people were made to feel we wanted to hold them back, limit their aspirations, when in truth the very opposite was our goal' (Conference 1999). In fact, he contended in his speech of 2004, 'the reason for our struggle against injustice has always been to liberate the individual' (Conference 2004). Similarly, to Gordon Brown, in a 1999 article entitled 'Equality – then and now', 'the issue for

socialists is not so much about what the state can do for you but about what the state can enable you to do for yourself' (Leonard 1999: 44).

Aside from abandoning their opposition to several policies mainly associated with or originating from the Conservatives, such as council house sales, restrictions on trade union power, privatisation and lower income tax levels, social democrats also sought to re-emphasise, sometimes in different forms than in the past, the ways in which traditional social democratic approaches could be supportive of people's aspirations to advance and improve themselves. Education was again central here. This was partly because the growing appetite for higher education could be seen as strongly egalitarian. It was also because Labour could present its emphasis on the importance of 'human capital' and the continuous raising of skill levels as evidence both of a forward-looking economic approach in the context of the decline in traditional manufacturing jobs and increased global competition, and of a commitment to provide training for people to empower them individually. As Brown put it in his first party conference speech as Labour leader on 25 September 2007: 'Up against the competition of two billion people in China and India, we need to unlock all the talent we have' (Conference 2007). In line with its claim to reconcile objectives that in previous decades had been unnecessarily presented as opposites in the left-right struggle, New Labour's 1997 Education White Paper claimed that in the past the pursuit of excellence in education was 'too often equated with elitism', and proposed to combine the promotion of greater educational opportunity for those previously denied it with furthering high educational standards, that is to say 'excellence for everyone' (Department for Education 1997: 145, 147).

There was also now an increasing emphasis on the importance of the quality of children's experiences in their early years and of their upbringings as determinants of how far they would be able to fulfil their potential as adults. Blair's view was that 'the life-chances of children are hugely influenced by their earliest experiences' (Blair 2002), and also that 'parents are a child's first and most important teacher' (Blair 1996). Two of Labour's six pre-election pledges in February 2005 focused on children. The first, with a vision of 'your child achieving more', dealt with education, and the second, 'your children with the best start', offered more choice over parental leave, and greater provision of childcare and after-school care (Pledges 2005). This was perhaps partly an electoral device, appealing to society's insistence on a rhetoric of children coming first. But it also reflected a real shift across the political spectrum, which had been developing for several decades, towards a greater attention to areas relating to children's early years, not least as a reflection of the increased political influence of feminist ideas.

In part this emphasis on early years and upbringing was directed at the improvement of individual life chances. Equally, it chimed with the traditional social democratic aim of enabling people to fulfil their *social* and *moral* potential as cooperative, public-spirited and perhaps even egalitarian-minded citizens. In a pamphlet published in 1995 entitled *Family and Community Socialism*, the ethical socialists Michael Young and A. H. Halsey, who had long highlighted what they saw as the importance of community and fraternity to socialism, suggested that they themselves and other socialists had been mistaken in the elevated status they had in the past accorded to nationalisation. The assumption that public ownership would make people behave better towards each other had, they claimed, been proved to be a mistake. The task now was to define socialism more directly in terms of relationships and community (Young and Halsey 1995: 1, 30). They stressed their belief that children were dependent upon their parents' care. A serene and stimulating childhood had direct ideological and political implications because it would foster the 'ability to transcend self-interest and regard the interests of others as in some way their own which is the sinew of any society' (Young and Halsey 1995: 11).

The increasing focus on micro-policy and on subjects such as education and children, and not just on macro-policy, economics and institutional change reflected a broad and growing sense among many social democrats that generating real opportunities for people required changes in culture, attitude and behaviour as much as in structures, laws or income levels. In a speech at Ruskin College, Oxford in December 1996 Blair called for the development of 'an ethic of education', reflecting his belief that 'culture, attitude and expectations are critical to successful education' (Blair 1996). Similarly, the government's 1997 Education White Paper insisted that 'effective change in a field as dependent on human interaction as education requires millions of people to change their behaviour' (Department for Education 1997: 146). Writing in 1998, leading New Labour thinker Anthony Giddens suggested that welfare had become more a 'psychic' than an economic concept. Consequently, he argued, counselling might now be more useful to people than direct economic assistance (Giddens 1998: 117). Social democrats now increasingly focused not only on what they saw as a deprivation or poverty of material conditions but also, as Peter Mandelson put it in 2001, on a 'poverty of individual expectations', or a 'poverty of hope' resulting from demoralised communities (Mandelson 2001).

There were two, in some respects contrasting, ways in which New Labour placed an increased emphasis on attitudes and behaviour. One stressed 'responsibility' and good behaviour as a personal moral choice, something individuals could achieve if they wanted to. Along these lines, Blair argued that 'it was essential for Labour to break free from the view

that social considerations weakened personal responsibility for crime and disorder' (Blair 1998: 12–14). A second approach was similar to the first in its rejection of an economic determinism which explained crime, behaviour or levels of achievement in terms of material poverty alone, but rather than replacing this with a belief that individuals had complete freedom of will or control it posited a pluralist view of causation in which economic, cultural, psychological and other causes intermingled. Proponents of the first view pointed to examples of how people had managed to overcome great disadvantage through force of will. Advocates of the second perspective suggested that such willpower was itself a resource more readily available to some people than others. David Blunkett, when asked in March 2004 whether his achievement in overcoming obstacles posed by his blindness, or his father's death in a workplace accident when he was 12, to become home secretary made him less sympathetic to those who failed to overcome their own obstacles, offered a response that is revealing about the ways in which he has had a foot in both of the above camps:

I plead guilty, certainly in my earlier days, to not fully understanding how some inadequacies – some difficulties in life – make it more of an obstacle than it was for me, for some people to go out and fight for what they wanted. I was tempted to say, 'Look here, it's in your own hands. Do something about it.' When I went into schools [Blunkett had previously been Education Secretary], I used to say, 'If I can do it, you can have a crack at it.' I do have to restrain that element in me. (Blunkett March 2004)

In practice both approaches co-existed in New Labour and often in individual social democrats, and there were obviously many different gradations of position along the spectrum from a belief in complete free will to complete determinism. The positions were not necessarily wholly contradictory, as a pluralist view of causation could incorporate a belief in some freedom of individual choice. But it is worth noting that the above two broad positions often had different origins and produced different proposed remedies. The first position had roots in traditional and religious views of morality, as well as in 'tough-minded' labourist and working-class culture, was driven partly by the electoral appeal of the simplicity of its view of causation, and stressed punishment. The second had its origins in liberal social democracy and in sociological and other academic research, and emphasised understanding, encouragement and policy responses appropriate to a belief that the constraints on potential were complex and multilayered.

Since the 1990s, the belief in a need for an increased focus on attitudes and behaviour in explaining constraints on, and furthering the development of, people's potential has been generally shared across the social democratic spectrum. But there has also been strong criticism from some

social democrats that New Labour has, in the process of upgrading the importance of attitudes, excessively downgraded the role of structures and power as determinants of people's life chances. Bill Rodgers, one of the SDP's 'Gang of Four', and now a Liberal Democrat, has complained that under New Labour 'there is a tendency to treat the poor not as victims but as perpetrators' (Rodgers 2000: 293). The most vocally expressed criticism of New Labour's education policies from within the Labour Party has come from its Croslandite ex-deputy leader Roy Hattersley. Hattersley has remained committed to the traditional egalitarian emphasis on promoting equality through income redistribution and egalitarian structures, especially comprehensive secondary schools. He has represented those socialists strongly opposed to New Labour's introduction of an element of selection in schools' admissions policies, asserting in January 2003 that:

the conduct [of the government] which had alienated so many natural Labour supporters was exemplified by one phrase – 'standards not structures' . . . The two ingredients of schools policy are indivisible. To pretend that they can be separated raises fundamental questions about the government's honesty. (Hattersley 2003)

On the 'soft left', Frank Dobson has argued that socialism requires 'a considerable equity of wealth and an equity of power which we don't have' (Dobson 2003). None of these strands of criticism have recommended either an abandonment of New Labour's attention to attitudes and behaviour or a complete return to the approaches of the pre-mid-1980s period. But they indicate the existence of a range of different social democratic analyses of the relative importance of attitudes, structures and power (and the nature of the relationship between these three) in affecting people's opportunities.

What does seem certain is that changes in Labour's language, ideas and policies since the mid-1980s have enjoyed substantial success in convincing people that the party has become more focused than before on the specific ways in which their ambitions and talents could be fulfilled. New Labour's three successive election victories were due in important part to this change in perception. Equally, though, there remain issues and debates about what exactly 'ambition' and the fulfilment of potential might mean, and how far the social democratic view of it might be different from that of the free-market right, and perhaps even from that of many citizens. In an article entitled 'Ambition and New Labour' in May 2001, Peter Mandelson argued that the concept of 'ambition' should be New Labour's compass during its second term and beyond it. But he emphasised that his definition of ambition was not simply about earning more money:

What exactly do social democrats mean by promoting ambition? First, it is clearly more than satisfying the instinct to get on in the market economy,

though business enterprise is an important means of realising ambition. New Labour needs to promote the idea that personal success is not judged only in terms of financial worth. Being ambitious is about individuals enhancing their sense of self-respect and well-being, maybe in 'conventional' forms of work, but also by volunteering, caring and following creative or intellectual pursuits. What concerns social democrats is that the means of realising personal ambition are shared equally. Equally important is being ambitious for our society, not just removing harsh and intolerable social injustices, but promoting a culture where people genuinely have equal worth. (Mandelson 2001)

Mandelson is often viewed by social democratic critics as the quintessential representative of a New Labour approach that has accommodated itself too far to a market agenda which values competition and the profit motive to the exclusion of all else, so this is an interesting complication of that picture, though, of course, it does not necessarily disprove the critique. More crucially for this chapter, it also illustrates the extent to which social democratic visions of what it means to develop one's potential and talent see much still to be done, and ultimately demand quite fundamental changes in what society values.

In education, for instance, some social democrats, while applauding the extensions of access to further study to vast numbers who would previously have left school at 16, are less at ease with contemporary utilitarian interpretations of the function of education which see it only as a pathway to higher earnings and status. Giddens's judgement was that 'although training in specific skills may be necessary for many job transitions, more important is the development of cognitive and emotional competence' (Giddens 1998: 125). Michael Barber, academic educationalist and head of the Blair government's Delivery Unit expressed his desire for a 'thoughtful society', and stressed that 'it ought surely to be a central purpose of schools that young people learn the ability to reason', noting that it would be ironic if the increasing public access to information coincided with a loss of the capacity to think about that information intelligently (Barber 1996: 17, 179, 181).

Conclusions: the future

The argument that everyone should have the chance to make the best of their abilities has long been an important part of what Labour, and to some extent also the Conservative Party, have promised at the level of broad aspiration and in certain practical social policy areas. But they have not tended to discuss or analyse the issue at length. The aim has often been allocated one or two lines in a general election manifesto, but left undeveloped. This

is perhaps unsurprising given, as noted earlier, the seemingly abstract, intangible nature of the idea of 'potential' among the many everyday practical policy challenges as well as the very wide range of constraints on the achievement of potential, some of which government has had only marginal ability to counteract.

However, there are some hints that this may be beginning to change. They were already evident in the Blair Government's greater emphasis on education, childhood, attitudes and behaviour. But it was in new Prime Minister Gordon Brown's party conference speech of 2007 that the idea of encouraging talent, potential and ambition was given central, extended and intellectually fairly systematic treatment, possibly more so than in any previous well-publicised British Prime Minister's speech. By way of illustrating its centrality in the speech, it is worth listing several phrases: Brown referred to teenage friends whose 'potential had never been nurtured'; 'when they heard about further education, they thought, or their parents thought, it was not for people like them'; he believed that 'everyone should rise as far as their talents can take them'; 'whenever we see talent under-developed; aspirations unfulfilled; potential wasted; obstacles to be removed; this is where we – New Labour will be'; he wanted a situation in which 'everyone has the chance to make the most of themselves'; he was convinced that the most important challenge ahead was to meet 'the rising aspirations of the British people'; 'in Britain today too many still cannot rise as far as their talents can take them'; 'this is the century where our country cannot afford to waste the talents of anyone'; 'the country that brings out the best in all its people will be the great success story of the global age'; 'how much talent that could flourish is lost through a poverty of aspiration: wasted not because young talents fail to reach the stars but because they grow up with no stars to reach for?'; he wanted a Britain 'where all are encouraged to aim high' and one 'not divided by class but united by aspiration' (Conference 2007).

One should not, of course, exaggerate the significance of one speech. Moreover, part of the motive for using the language of talent and potential was rhetorical, designed to maintain Labour's association with aspiration and upward mobility. And there remain considerable tensions between visions of ambition and social mobility built exclusively around the competitive acquisition of material and status rewards and those broader conceptions of ambition that animated thinkers such as Morris and Tawney. They sought to develop citizens' moral, intellectual and cultural, and not just economic, potential and they also considered the potential of society as a whole, not only that of atomised individuals.

Nevertheless, the speech does seem symbolically important, partly for what it highlights about the growing centrality in social democracy, and in

British politics and society more broadly, of issues of talent and potential, and partly because it illuminates some of the benefits (past, present and future) to social democracy of an emphasis on developing people's talents, potential and ambitions. First, such an emphasis has been and is optimistic, positive and constructive, rising above the class conflict agenda of some on both the left and the right. Second, there is also a strong egalitarian emphasis on inclusion – it is about liberating the potential of everybody. Third, the social democratic analysis of the development of potential is now often relatively multilayered, since it acknowledges the complexity of the different obstacles to people developing their full potential, seeks to change both structures and attitudes rather than only one or the other, and focuses on ways of overcoming the 'poverty of aspiration' in which structural and attitudinal barriers conspire and intermingle together. Finally, voters have associated words such as talent and potential with other words which they often find attractive such as optimism, mobility, inclusion, ambition and opportunity, and these associations mean that 'talent' and 'potential' have been and are likely to continue to be concepts from which Labour can benefit electorally. Promising to help people fulfil their talents and potential, then, can both help social democrats to stay in office and help them to advance some of their most central egalitarian and social democratic objectives. At the same time, there remain crucial differences between popular definitions of ambition in terms only of material and status rewards and more idealistic social democratic definitions. Given all of these points, there may be considerable benefits in a twofold strategy. This would employ the language of talent, potential and ambition broadly and attractively before voters, but simultaneously seek to re-shape and develop people's visions of what those terms might mean.

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