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Understanding Labour's ideological trajectory

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The Labour Party is habitually considered the most ideologically inclined of all British political parties, and ideological struggle has been endemic within the party since its foundation. It is no surprise, therefore, that studies of the party have endeavoured to understand why Labour's ideology has shifted repeatedly throughout its history. This chapter considers those efforts.

A large and varied literature is available to explain Labour's ideological movements. Many works address the Labour Party itself. Others examine ideological change in parties in general. Yet others analyse change in social democratic parties in particular. To assess all three strands in the literature requires the application of some form of classification. At the risk of oversimplification, the approach adopted here will be to classify works according to the principal explanatory strategies they adopt. Five strategies are identified and outlined: materialist; ideational; electoral; institutional; and those which synthesise some or all of these four. The five strategies are assessed, and the chapter concludes by outlining an alternative model of Labour's ideological dynamics that might be usefully applied to the study of the New Labour.

Outlines of explanatory strategies

Materialist strategies

The first set of explanatory strategies proposes that Labour's ideological shifts are a product of economic and social determinants. Here three main strands of analysis emerge.

The first strand focuses on the pressure of capitalist interests. Claims that Labour's ideological movements are responses to the structural power of capitalist interests have appealed particularly to Marxist scholars such as Miliband (1972) and Panitch (1976), but are best developed by Coates (see chapter 5 of this collection, by David Coates and Leo Panitch). For Coates (1975: 154), 'the major blockage on the ability of the Labour Party to reform capitalism into socialism by the Parliamentary process, or even to sustain major programmes of social reform, comes from the institutions and representatives of corporate capital'. Forced to

co-operate with capitalist interests that control production, investment and employment decisions, Labour governments 'have been clawed to death by the opposition of organised capital' and have surrendered their radical ambitions (Coates 1996: 71). It has also been argued that this structural power of capitalist interests extends to ideological shifts during Labour's periods of opposition. Thus Wickham-Jones (1995) claims that anxiety over business antagonism prompted Labour to pro-actively moderate its economic strategy after 1989.

The second strand focuses on changes in the character of capitalism. The linking of ideological movement to changes in the character of capitalism has a distinguished lineage. Eduard Bernstein, a German socialist, claimed at the end of the nineteenth century that prosperity had curbed capitalism's propensity to generate crisis, and brought the proletariat material advances that drew it away from revolutionary ambitions (see Bernstein 1961). These trends, coupled with growth of the middle classes, Bernstein concluded, required social democrats to moderate their ideological appeals.

Similar arguments recur in relation to Labour. For Crosland (1963: 63) capitalism had been transformed by the mid-1950s, demanding 'an explicit admission that many of the old dreams are either dead or realised'. Prosperity had remedied the abuses and inefficiencies of the capitalist system. In addition full employment, the transfer of economic power to the State, trade unions and managers rendered the ideological totems of the past redundant. Nationalisation and material redistribution were anachronisms; creating genuine social equality and a classless society should become Labour's new mission.

Such claims also re-emerged in later years. Writing in 1989, the authors of *New Times* argued that 'much of the labour and democratic movement still rests upon a world which is fast disintegrating beneath its feet. It still lives in the last house of a terrace which is slowly being demolished and redeveloped' (Hall and Jacques 1989: 24). On this account an epochal shift from Fordism to post-Fordism was generating a new economic, social, political and cultural order which necessitated ideological renovation of Labourism. But most arguments of this genre thereafter were typically more pessimistic, proposing that changes in capitalism created new and fundamental constraints upon social democracy. For Smith (1994) such transformations of the economic environment drastically limited Labour's ideological options. Similarly, Crouch (1997) viewed ideological revision as inescapable given the redundancy of demand management and Fordist production, the internationalisation of capital and the emergence of new occupational groups. John Gray, however, provided the most vivid exposition of how the new international economy impelled ideological change. For Gray (1996: 32), '[e]conomic globalisation removes, or weakens, the policy levers whereby social democratic governments sought to bring about social solidarity and egalitarian distribution', prohibiting full employment through deficit financing, constraining redistribution via taxation and restricting welfare state expenditures.

A third materialist explanatory strategy focuses on changes in the class structure, in particular changes in the class composition of the British electorate and their electoral implications for Labour. For Hobsbawm (1981), the 'forward march

of Labour' had been halted by the early 1980s, given social changes to Labour's core electorate. Technological change, the rise of monopoly capitalism and improved living standards reduced the numbers and solidarity of the British working class, requiring Labour to reconsider its ideological position. Others drew attention also to the decline of Labour's core voters (working-class union members and council-house tenants) after 1964 (Heath and McDonald 1987), a trend subsequently confirmed up to the 1997 election (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 2001).

Such analyses of social change have been closely associated with accounts of attitudinal change within the electorate, with claims regarding embourgeoisment being particularly prominent. The basic argument here is that as manual workers achieve relatively high incomes they adopt characteristically middle-class lifestyles. Assimilated into middle-class society, these embourgeoisified proletarians become increasingly moderate politically, demanding parallel ideological responses from social democratic parties.

Within the general literature on political parties, Kirchheimer's 1966 ideologically bland catch-all parties are triggered by embourgeoisment, but within the literature on Labour the classic statement is Abrams, Rose and Hinden's *Must Labour Lose?* (1960). After the 1959 election they concluded that 'the Labour Party's traditional sources of support in the environment, in traditional values and party loyalties have been weakening' (1960: 97). Whereas the Conservatives succeeded in identifying themselves with the affluent society and its ascendant occupational groups, Labour was handicapped by its image as the representative of the working class. Electoral revival therefore demanded ideological renewal.

During the 1980s these arguments returned. For example, Radice (1992) located Labour's problems in its anachronistic image as a working-class party unattractive to upwardly mobile families, particularly those in southern England. Similarly, for Crewe, the non-manual workforce had expanded, but in addition social mobility placed increasing numbers of voters in cross-pressured class locations, leading to a haemorrhage of Labour supporters among the new skilled working class. Thus Crewe (1992: 96) argued: 'If Labour is ever again to form a secure majority government it must pitch camp on the "affluent centre ground"'

Ideational strategies

A second approach to understanding Labour's ideological shifts is to refer to ideational factors. Here two broad sets of explanations emerge.

The first strand has been concerned with dominant ideas. The 'Labourist' critique of the party has identified a dominant bourgeois intellectual tradition in Britain which constrains and moderates Labour ideologically. For Anderson (1992: 33), for example, Britain's exceptional path of development (the absence of a genuine bourgeois revolution; its pioneering role as the first industrial nation; its extensive imperial possessions and a stature as an undefeated nation in two world wars) 'produced a proletariat distinguished by an immovable corporate class consciousness, intent on pursuing its ends within the existing social order. This underpinned Labour's reformist trajectory and generated a traditionalist and empiricist intellectual paradigm which left radical ideas stillborn inside and outside the party.'

Saville (1973: 225) similarly laments the British Left's incapacity 'to develop and maintain a critique of contemporary society that seriously grappled with its dominant ideas'.

Others, however, attempt to understand more discrete historical episodes of ideological movement by reference to dominant ideas. Hay and Watson (1998) propose that Labour adopted a particular set of *arguments* about globalisation, and it is these dominant ideas rather than the purported economic changes in themselves that underpin recent ideological changes. Heffernan also argues that dominant political beliefs proved critical during the 1980s: as '[n]eo-liberal political attitudes . . . pervaded the body politic, colonising intellectual territory inch by inch', so Labour was impelled to recast its ideology in keeping with its new ideological environment (1997: 46).

The second strand in the ideational approach concentrates on the role of intellectuals. Here Desai (1994) offers the most systematic analysis. To Desai, political circumstances after the 1930s allowed intellectuals a powerful voice in the party. On this account the revisionism of the 1950s originated among the intellectuals of the Fabian Society, *Socialist Commentary* and *Encounter* and prospered because these intellectuals enjoyed the patronage of the leadership, an intellectual ascendancy within the party and a close alliance with union leaders. However, it is Driver and Martell (1997, 1998) who most clearly identify the role of intellectuals in the genesis of New Labour. They have noted the influence of communitarian political philosophers including Etzioni, MacIntyre and Sandel. Moreover, they highlight the ideational influence of Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens in the development of New Labour's welfare and social policies. Indeed, Giddens, as the principal theoretician of the 'Third Way', is perhaps the chief inspiration for New Labour's most recent ideological departures.

Electoral strategies

The electoral imperatives for ideological movement constitute a third approach. In the literature on political parties, Downs (1957: 295) provides the classic statement: 'parties in democratic politics are analogous to entrepreneurs in a profit seeking economy . . . they formulate whatever policies they believe will gain most votes', leading them to contest the electoral middle ground where most voters are located. Accordingly, Labour's ideological shifts can be viewed simply as successive attempts to capture this electoral middle ground.

Alternatively, Przeworski (1985) argues that the de-radicalisation of social democracy emerges from the structure of choices generated by electoral politics. For Przeworski pursuing politics through parliamentary institutions necessitated that social democrats reconcile themselves to the absence of a proletarian numerical majority in each Western nation. This required social democrats to seek multi-class alliances and abandon radical class-based politics. Furthermore, such alliances ruptured the proletariat-party link. Recruiting middle-class allies diluted the class identity of social democracy's working-class constituency: working-class support was lost and the predisposition to ideological moderation was further reinforced.

In the literature specifically devoted to Labour, electoral pressures are taken almost as given, albeit rarely understood, via the systematised approach of Downs and Przeworski. For some, however, Labour's ideological movements are viewed almost wholly in terms of responses to electoral pressures. For example, for Taylor (1997) the party's policy review, undertaken after its 1987 election defeat, sought to secure electoral victory by formulating a set of alternative policies and demonstrating its competence to form a government. For Leys (1997: 17), similarly, ideological changes after 1989 were 'overwhelmingly driven by the need for electoral recovery'.

Institutional strategies

A fourth strategy concentrates on intra-party agents and actors. Here we encounter embourgeoisment again, with claims that embourgeoisified social democratic leaders are responsible for ideological change. The most renowned account is that of Michels (1959: 163), for whom the 'iron law of oligarchy' held that sophisticated organisation (an inevitable response to the recruitment of a mass membership) guaranteed the leadership's dominance over and separation from the membership, impressing 'upon the most revolutionary of parties an indelible stamp of conservatism'. Yet, this became inevitable with the deproletarianising of the party's most capable members who, upon elevation to the party hierarchy, accustomed themselves to bourgeois salaries, lifestyles and outlooks and abandoned their militancy.

Similar arguments occasionally surface in the literature on Labour. For example, Guttsman (1963) considers that after 1918 Labour moderated its position as it attracted individuals from the intelligentsia and the new middle class. Bauman (1972) drew similar conclusions, observing how after 1922 Labour became reliant upon the political expertise of the professional classes. This, coupled with the embourgeoisment of the working class itself, meant that 'the Labour Party began to adopt a conservative attitude towards the structure and the social hierarchy within which the advancement both of the workers as a class and of workers and their sons as individuals was being accomplished' (1972: 286).

Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs of leading party members also focus pre-eminently on the intra-party dynamics of ideological change. For example, Brivati (1996: 138) contends: 'It was Gaitskell more than any single individual who ensured that the British labour movement did not take the Bevanite road.' However, many non-biographical accounts of Labour's ideological movement also stress intra-party factors. For example, Haseler (1969) accounts for revisionism in the 1950s by reference to right-wing dominance of the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the unions, and Gaitskell's own predilections as leader. Both Hatfield's 1978 study of Labour's leftwards shift in the early 1970s and Wickham-Jones's 1996 analysis of the development of the 'alternative economic strategy' draw attention to the machinations of factions and individuals within the National Executive Committee. Similarly, Hughes and Wintour (1990) account for the policy review by reference to the decisions of key individuals in the party's highest echelons.

The party leadership's role in ideological change has also exercised the party's

left-wing critics. Miliband in particular proposes that right-wing leaders betrayed the radicalism of the party's rank and file and the British working class. For Miliband (1972: 373) the party's 'leaders are not socialists who for some reason or other have lost their way and who can be brought back to the true path by persuasion or pressure. They are bourgeois politicians with, at best, a certain bias towards social reform.' Miliband conceded that the Left could win concessions. However, the leadership's 'absolute determination to "fight and fight and fight again" to save the party they love – to save it from socialist policies that is' – guaranteed that accommodations were temporary and that radical commitments quickly evaporated (Miliband 1977: 47).

Finally, there are those who have drawn attention to the impulses for ideological moderation that follow entry into the corridors of political power. In particular, Tony Benn, Richard Crossman, Barbara Castle, Brian Sedgemore and Michael Meacher 'have popularized a left-wing version of *Yes, Minister*, in which a devious and conspiratorial Whitehall bureaucracy represents a formidable obstacle to the achievement of Labour's socialist programme' (Theakston 1992: ix).

Synthetic strategies

The approaches considered above are not mutually exclusive. Indeed there have been attempts to synthesise them. For example, within the general literature on political parties Panebianco (1988) proposes that ideological change arises from both exogenous and endogenous factors. For Panebianco, such dynamics have three distinct phases. First, the party is thrown into crisis by an environmental event, for example, electoral defeat. This triggers a second phase where the coalition leading the party is discredited. Finally, a new governing coalition emerges which, to consolidate its control of the party, seeks to change party rules and goals.

Within the literature on social democracy three synthetic accounts which seek to explain differing patterns of ideological change in West European social democratic parties stand out. For Koelble (1991), social democratic parties are faced with new economic conditions, social change and a New Right critique of their governmental practice. However, Koelble proposes that responses to these conditions are mediated by party structures; particularly the extent to which activists and unions hinder leadership-led ideological innovation.

Kitschelt (1994) argues that a new dimension of libertarian–authoritarian party competition has emerged, while the traditional socialist–capitalist axis of electoral competition has ratcheted rightwards. For Kitschelt party responses to this environment are determined principally by institutional factors, particularly the organisational flexibility of the party, the degree of leadership autonomy and the political sentiments of members. However, Kitschelt also introduces ideational factors, suggesting that choices of political strategy are constrained by the party's existing political traditions.

Finally, Hamilton (1989) formulates a complex model that considers characteristics of the state, the labour movement and the economic, political and electoral environments, and intra-party factors. This is best illustrated by Hamilton's explanation of Labour's ideological shifts between 1951 and 1964. At that time party

divisions, the intensification of the Cold War and Gaitskell's election as leader all facilitated ideological revision. In addition, an increasingly affluent society was emerging. However, two factors are deemed pre-eminent. Firstly, winning floating votes required ideological moderation. Secondly, revisionists skilfully manipulated the oligarchic characteristics of party institutions to win the institutional supremacy necessary to revise Labour's ideology.

Many accounts focusing on Labour also combine explanatory themes. For example, for Thompson (1993) electoral pressures and cultural changes, particularly a shift from collectivism to consumerism that eroded the labour movement's solidarity, triggered ideological change in the 1950s. For Shaw (1994), however, Labour's ideological shifts since the 1980s are explained by three sets of variables. Shaw argues that the political environment, particularly the rise of the Social Democrat Party (SDP), the vigorous competition for working-class votes and an ideologically buoyant New Right demanded ideological movement. These variables found parallel pressures in the economic environment, particularly globalisation, the redundancy of Keynesianism and the curtailed economic jurisdiction of the nation state. Finally, intra-party dynamics, particularly the marginalising of the Labour Left, facilitated ideological change.

Assessing the explanatory strategies

The merits of these explanatory strategies can now be considered. In the space available here only a very general assessment can be undertaken. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that many of these studies offer important insights for our understanding of Labour's ideological trajectory. Yet, equally, a number of general problems are evident.

The accounts offered above operate with very different explanatory ambitions. Several, implicitly or explicitly, endeavour to provide a comprehensive theory of Labour's ideological shifts. Yet such general theories struggle to provide convincing explanations of the more discrete episodes of ideological change. For example, Marxist scholars have viewed Labour's ideological shifts as instalments in the party's fundamental predisposition towards reformism. However, this focus leaves them poorly equipped to explain the admittedly exceptional but significant periods when Labour's ideology has been reshaped to express more radical ambitions.

In addition we also find that many accounts focus on a relatively narrow range of ideological issues, often economic management and public ownership. Yet it is not clear that factors which explain revision of part of Labour's ideological commitments can explain the broader range of ideological revisionism. For example, economic globalisation may have driven recent ideological changes, but that analysis surely has greater explanatory purchase in relation to the party's economic strategy than it enjoys in relation to ideological changes in areas such as defence, law and order or constitutional matters.

In addition a further general difficulty emerges in the relationship between structure and agency. Materialist, ideational and electoral explanatory strategies account for Labour's ideological trajectory in factors exogenous to the party. But

these explanations operate at considerable distance from the institutional processes and agents within the party. Consequently there is a tendency for such works to degenerate into determinist, even teleological, explanations in which actors within the party are seemingly without consequence.

Yet institutional accounts typically bend the stick an equal distance in the opposite direction. Here the interaction of intra-party actors becomes the focus of analysis. But attention to the micro-practices of ideological change typically lacks an understanding of how exogenous constraints and opportunities interact with the ideological intentions of these actors. Accordingly, we are often left with the impression that ideological movement is an autistic process engineered exclusively within the hermetically sealed portals of the party's headquarters, the Palace of Westminster, Downing Street and Whitehall.

Beyond these general considerations, difficulties also arise which are specific to each of the main explanatory strategies discussed above.

I considered above claims that Labour's ideological movements are responses to capitalist pressure. Four observations are pertinent.

- It is unclear that Labour's objectives and the preferences of capital need always irrevocably conflict.
- Such accounts arguably overstate the potency of British capital, which has only exceptionally achieved the common consciousness, coherence and conspiratorial capacities necessary to enforce demands on Labour.
- Such arguments are frequently ahistorical. In particular, the Attlee Government failed to assuage capitalist fears yet succeeded in enacting significant social reforms.
- Even if these considerations are dismissed, an alternative strategy is available to Labour. Thus Labour could respond to capitalist demands not by capitulation but by demonstrating the promise of a radical programme to strengthen the British economy (Hay 1997).

Claims that Labour's ideological shifts are responses to changes in the character of capitalism are also contentious. If we momentarily accept that globalisation has transformed the economic environment it nevertheless seems unduly deterministic to propose that acceptance of neo-liberal economics followed with inevitability. Indeed, Labour's alternative economic strategy was a response to these developments, and since it was never unequivocally implemented in office it seems precipitate to foreclose it as a rational alternative. Equally, although continental social democratic parties have also redesigned their economic strategies the approach of some of them suggests scope for ideological discretion. The Parti Socialiste, for example, has approached globalisation more critically than has New Labour, seeking to protect workers from its pernicious effects (Goes 2000).

If, however, we adopt a sceptical approach to globalisation (for example, along the lines of Hirst and Thompson 1996), there is evidence that leftist governments do not automatically incur the wrath of financial markets, and also that globalisation is not a novel process. Indeed, it might be argued that the UK economy has always been internationally orientated and vulnerable to external shocks. If this is

accepted then the economic constraints currently faced by Labour are little different from those faced by the 1964–70 and 1974–79 Governments. This suggests that New Labour's accommodation to neo-liberalism can be no more directly read off the economic environment than can Old Labour's dirigiste economic strategies.

Finally, Coates and Hay (2000) have shown that since 1997 Labour ministers have presented globalisation not as a deterministic process to which political actors were inevitably forced to concede (as was argued in opposition) but as a contingent tendency to be promoted and defended against critics and sceptics. This implies that compliance with the constraints of globalisation is a process that is as much a matter of intellectual conviction as it is an accommodation to material 'realities'.

Explanations focused on changes in class structure are also problematical. Claims that embourgeoisment drives ideological reappraisal share similar myths of a golden past and insinuations upon novelty and determinism. As Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt (1968) originally demonstrated, and as Tiratsoo (1991: 50) has argued in relation to the 1950s, the case for a 'fundamental transformation in working class attitudes at this time is remarkably thin'. Enthusiasts for the embourgeoisment thesis overlooked the substantial number of the working class who denied Labour their votes in the past. Furthermore, as Tiratsoo has noted, Conservative electoral victories between 1951 and 1959 were narrow in terms of votes and originated in the collapse of the Liberal vote. Equally, more recent changes to the British social structure may also have been overestimated. Thus Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1992) found 'trendless fluctuation' rather than decisive evidence of class dealignment during the 1980s. Moreover, while they recognised that the growth of the middle class did present problems for Labour, they suggest it explained only half the decline in Labour's vote, the remainder being found in the shortcomings of Labour's general electoral strategy, its image and its reputation for fratricide, in addition to its ideology. Indeed, as their most recent work reminds us, 'support for radical values cannot be read off mechanically from social change' (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 2001: 29).

Nor are ideational explanations without problems. In particular, there is a tendency to overestimate the torpor of British intellectuals (Thompson 1965). The fortunes of British intellectuals have ebbed and flowed (Shils 1972) and at several historical moments intellectuals have provided radical ideas which Labour has adopted. Indeed, it is to be doubted that Labour's relatively radical ideological prospectuses of 1945, 1974 and 1983 can be wholly accounted for without acknowledging the contributions of intellectuals such as Keynes, Beveridge, Stuart Holland and E. P. Thompson.

As Labour is an electoral organisation it would be foolish to deny that electoral pressures affect the party's ideological dynamics. Yet electoral fortunes are determined by various factors aside from ideology. Those minded to employ electoral verdicts as the basis for ideological revision therefore face untangling the contribution of ideological commitments from party campaigning, image, leadership and its capacity to counter-attack its opponents.

It is also not obvious that Labour should respond to electoral unpopularity by ideological reappraisal. In the past this imperative did not always present itself. For example, the Wilson Report (1955) blamed Labour's election defeat of that year upon an organisation which remained 'at the penny farthing stage in a jet-propelled era.' In this the party was merely assimilating contemporary psephological wisdom which held that 'irrational forces' among the electorate required parties to improve organisational capacities to mobilise an already faithful core electorate.

However, even when this electoral strategy was abandoned it did not follow that the party should adopt a Downsian strategy. Politics is a process of persuasion, and opportunities arise for reshaping public opinion through argument (Dunleavy 1991). Thus, alongside preference-accommodating electoral strategies, in which ideologies are transformed to correspond with the beliefs of the electorate, preference-shaping strategies are available which preserve existing ideological commitments and meet the hostility of public opinion with efforts to erode the public distaste for these commitments.

Yet even when Labour has adopted a preference-accommodating strategy there have remained areas of its ideology that were not revised in accordance with this broad strategy, perhaps because these issues lacked electoral salience. For example, if we account for the shift from Old to New Labour in terms of preference accommodation, the party's embrace of European integration is puzzling since, as Tony Blair has acknowledged, the 'opinion polls probably would push us toward a sceptic approach' – an approach which he has denounced as 'folly' (*The Economist*, 8 April 1995).

Przeworski's 1985 account is also contentious. Firstly, Przeworski employs a highly restrictive definition of the working class that seems essential if his electoral trade-off is to function. Secondly, Przeworski's model isolates working-class interests and delineates them as distinct from those of other classes. Yet it is unclear that full employment and an extensive welfare state, for example, are beneficial exclusively to the working class. Thirdly, Przeworski relies for a class trade-off not on concrete statistical evidence but on estimates which, as Sainsbury (1990) has suggested, are somewhat eccentric. Indeed, her analysis of the Swedish Social Democrats suggests that it is possible to construct social democratic positions which appeal to both workers and non-workers.

Institutional explanations of the party's ideological trajectory are also problematical. Accounts referring to embourgeoisment of party members are as culpable of sociological determinism as those referring to the electorate. Indeed, embourgeoisment actually promoted the rise of the Labour Left in the 1970s as an influx of young, educated, public service professionals, radicalised trade unionists and feminists formed 'a more assertive rank and file . . . less deferential to parliamentarians (Right and Left!), more determined and persistent in its desire to achieve radical change' (Seyd 1987: 53).

The Left's analysis of leadership dominance enjoys somewhat firmer foundations. Successive studies have shown how party leaders have enjoyed a pre-eminence in party affairs through patronage, loyalty, control of disciplinary and decision-making procedures and habitual support from the trade unions, the NEC

and the PLP. Equally, the claim that Labour leaders accept radical commitments under duress and then abandon them at opportune moments enjoys some confirmation. For example, most of the party's leadership were never reconciled to the alternative economic strategy (Wickham-Jones 1996) or to unilateral nuclear disarmament.

Studies of the party membership, however, undermine the claim that the leadership has habitually betrayed the radical instincts of the rank and file. Certainly constituency Labour Parties' (CLP) preferences have been overridden by union conference votes, frustrated by manipulation of conference procedures or wilfully ignored by the leadership. Yet there are also occasions when constituency delegates have willingly endorsed moderation of the party's ideology (Hindell and Williams 1962).

Neither need we accept the Left's view of 'the party as a wasted lion led . . . by the same old donkeys' (Bale 1999: 196), since leadership pre-eminence is neither absolute nor guaranteed. As Minkin (1978, 1991) has shown, party leaders have been forced to accommodate trade union preferences on various occasions. Nor should we neglect clear differences between leaders. For Gaitskill, Kinnock and Blair, for example, party leadership demanded an ideological lead, intolerance of dissent and full use of the resources available to the office in reshaping the party's ideology. Yet, others have been attentive to party unity and have inhibited ideological change. Attlee, for example, between 1951 and 1955, was even-handed in frustrating the ideological ambitions of both the Bevanites and the revisionists. Likewise, as Shadow Chancellor John Smith refused to abandon welfare benefits' increases and redistributive taxation, while as leader his commitment to universalism prevented 'modernisers' developing proposals for targeted welfare benefits.

Finally, evidence for Whitehall resistance is also equivocal. For every Benn, Crossman, Castle and Meacher there are figures such as Attlee, Morrison, Healey, Jenkins and Williams who lionise the neutrality and amenability of civil servants. It is also noteworthy that accounts of civil service resistance exclude the 1945–51 Governments (Theakston 1992). Indeed, the disappointments of later Labour governments can be accounted for by factors other than civil service opposition. For example, if the civil service is blamed for the 1974–79 Government's retreat from Benn's industrial strategy, we are apt to neglect the opposition of the Cabinet and of capital to both Benn and his proposals.

Conclusion: towards an alternative model of Labour's ideological dynamics

Tim Bale (1999: 192) has called for scholars of the party to develop accounts of Labour's past that are 'theoretically rooted, but empirically convincing and constructed'. As should now be clear, there are shortcomings in existing accounts of Labour's ideological dynamics which make Bale's exhortations particularly relevant to this area of the study of the Labour Party.

If we are to follow Bale an alternative model of Labour's ideological dynamics is necessary. Such a model must recognise two important insights at the outset. Firstly, ideological change must be unpacked into two distinct processes. Fre-

quently ideological change is conceived as determining simply the contents of ideological commitments. However, from the work of Heclo (1974) and Kingdon (1984) we can see that before ideological commitments are reshaped there is a prior dynamic which places particular axioms under question and therefore shapes the *agenda* for ideological change. This dynamic need not be identical to that shaping the *content* of ideological changes thereafter. For example, electoral imperatives may prompt reassessment of an existing ideological commitment but the substantive shaping of the new commitment may be better understood by reference to the institutional dynamics of the party.

Secondly, the ontological foundations of an alternative model – its theory of reality – should be considered. Here critical realist theory overrides the rigid dualism between structure and agency, identified above. (A full account of this perspective cannot be offered here; see Archer 1995; Bhaskar 1997; Marsh *et al.* 1997). Suffice it to say that critical realism views the relationships between structure, discourse and agency as irreducible and dialectical. Structures are viewed as imposing objective constraints on and opportunities for political actors. Yet these constraints and opportunities are also mediated by discourse, shaping political agents' interpretation of their social and structural environment and conditioning their calculations. Political actors remain ultimately 'causal', in so far as they are responsible for their own behaviour, but their decisions are conditioned by the constraints and opportunities imposed and afforded by their structural and discursive environment.

From these insights it follows that material factors cannot always be directly and authentically experienced by actors within the party. Moreover, no material condition can impact upon the process of ideological change without a parallel process of interpretation. As Kingdon (1984: 115) notes:

There is a difference between a condition and a problem . . . Conditions become defined as problems because we come to believe that we should do something about them. Problems are not simply the conditions or external events themselves; there is also a perceptual, interpretative element.

Of themselves, therefore, material conditions rarely determine the content of ideological changes. For example, a rising level of crime, recognised politically as a problem, in itself dictates the adoption neither of punitive penal policies nor of enhanced policies for crime prevention. As such, material conditions serve principally to shape the *agenda* of ideological change.

Belief systems and intellectual constructs are essential to the calculations of actors within the party, allowing them to overcome conditions of imperfect knowledge. However, such dominant beliefs should also not be viewed as direct determinants of the content of ideological changes. Rather they establish constraints on the politically feasible options available to intra-party agents. Dominant ideas preserve particular issues and assumptions from contestation and inhibit alternative ideas entering the agenda of ideological change. Likewise, given their comparative advantage in the intellectual environment, agents face pressure to abandon inherited positions running counter to the pattern of dominant beliefs.

Political parties are office seeking, so that electoral considerations necessarily intervene. Yet intra-party actors face acute difficulties in discovering and interpreting the public's ideological preferences and in drawing ideological conclusions from the electoral fortunes of the party. Furthermore, the imperative to refashion elements of the party's ideology depends on their overall salience within the public's ranking of the most important electoral issues. As such, public and electoral opinion certainly sensitises intra-party actors to the need to reconsider the party's ideological position. Yet, in shaping the content of the ideological changes that follow, public preferences usually provide only broad and vague recommendations and do not preclude other non-electoral considerations.

It is among the institutions, mechanisms, processes and actors of the party that ideological changes are initiated, alternatives considered, policy statements drafted, amended and voted upon. As such, it is here that the content of ideological changes should be seen as being principally shaped. Accordingly the preferences of agents, and the resources available to agents in this process, are of great significance. However, these actors are not autonomous in respect of their environment, nor are they bearers of structures; rather they interpret and respond to their environment.

Finally, the specific contexts in which ideological shifts arise must be considered. The material, ideational, electoral and intra-party environments are dynamic. For example, beliefs rise, achieve dominance, then fall and fragment. Within the party formal and informal relations of power may change. Moreover, the general strategic outlook of the party may shift, with choices between electoral strategies of preference-shaping and accommodation being particularly significant.

Such a model may not provide especially parsimonious explanations. But it does promise more nuanced accounts of ideological change, and it makes available to convincing analysis a wider range of the varied ideological shifts of the party than do existing theories. Indeed, such an approach may prove particularly valuable in reaching fresh understandings of the most recent ideological transformation of the party from 'Old' to 'New' Labour, a transformation that, as Kenny and Smith (2001: 234) suggest, is 'a complex political problem which requires a multidimensional and disaggregated interpretation'.

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