

Jasper Haywood M.A.
07464 246114
j.williamhaywood@gmail.com
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Betrayal in the Labour Party: irrelevant divisions and silent debates

An exploration of emotive policy change and its implications in regards to the British Labour Party

Introduction

December 13, 2019, Boris Johnson won the largest Conservative majority since 1987. In contrast, the Labour Party returned just 202 seats, their worst result since 1935. The party's once-reliable Northern red wall finally began to crumble. This was an election Labour lost. Take Sedgefield, Tony Blair's former constituency, where in comparison to an 8% increase in the Conservative vote, the Labour vote collapsed 17%. A period of reflection is inevitable. Many explanations are going to be offered about why Labour lost. Ultimately Jeremy Corbyn was a hard sell. However, this article is not concerned with the minutiae of his leadership. Adopting a macro view can expose the longer term issues at the core of Labour's inability to win. Specifically, this analyses the process of change within the Labour Party, examining how the emotive tendencies of party members negatively impacts on new policy narratives by consolidating the power of established factions. This ultimately limits the appeal of Labour outside of its committed, yet ultimately misguided, membership. Moving forward, Labour needs to prove that it is responsive to change; in order to achieve this, members must prevent a 'one-last-heave' Corbyn successor whilst also resisting a return to business-as-usual 'New' Labour.

The Membership

The membership carry great weight over the direction of the Labour Party. The 2010 General Election illustrates how this power extends beyond merely selecting the next leader, towards control over the general policy direction. After ending an unprecedented 13 years in office, the 2010 General Election opened space for a 'new party narrative' to emerge (Gaffney & Lahel 2013, p.340). However, the simultaneous attempt to resist a return to 'Old Labour' and look beyond 'New Labour' failed to persist in Ed Miliband's lexicon (Batrouni 2017, pp.433-438). Unimpressed with Miliband's *One Nation Labour*, the membership swiftly opted for Corbyn's platform of traditional socialism after the 2015 defeat. Contrasting the 2010 and 2015 leadership elections clearly demonstrate how attitudes within the membership had shifted, and highlight how this power determines the policy direction of the party. In 2010, the New Labour continuity candidate, David Miliband, won over half of membership votes and the majority of CLP nominations, losing only given the weight of the Trade Union vote; by 2015 however, 59.5% of member's backed Corbyn's left wing platform. Clearly, within 5 years, the predominant attitude within the party membership had moved away from supporting moderate progressive politics and towards traditional socialism, in the process overlooking Ed Miliband's alternative party narrative.

“Navigating a course between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Labour is essential to winning power”

The questions posed in this article are:

- 1. Why an apparent diametric between ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Labour persists;**
- 2. How has impacted on the failure to establish new narratives;**
- 3. What can be done in regards to the future of the party.**

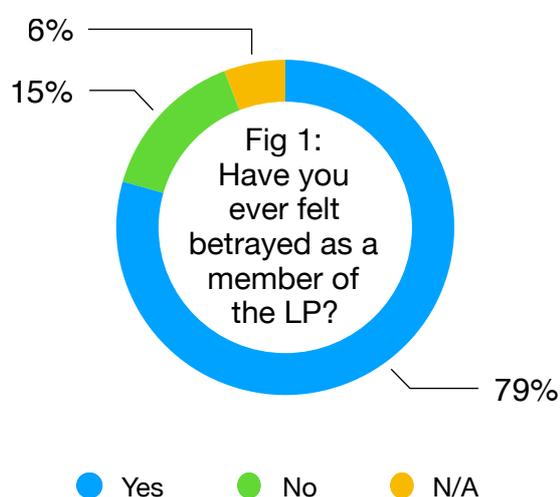
An Emotive Party:

TRUST AND BETRAYAL

To answer the first question, it is essential to deconstruct the process of change within the Labour Party. This is grounded in trust, a sparse yet essential political commodity. According to IPSOS MORI, only 14% of the public surveyed have trust in politicians, leaving the profession firmly at the bottom of the 2019 veracity index ([ipsos.com](https://www.ipsos.com) 2019). Yukl (2013, p.331) rationalises that trust is forged in the consistency between promise and behaviour. When a political promise is achieved, trust is formed; though, when a promise is ignored, trust is lost. Whilst this interpretation contains truth, it overlooks the extent to which trust is a 'human need' that can actively stimulate change (Reina and Reina 2006, pp.4-5). Indeed, it generally assumes that the absence of trust makes the likelihood of political change harder, as the electorate are assumed to be disenfranchised and apathetic (Tillyris 2017, p.482; Bohnet & Zeckhauser 2004, p.468; Elangovan & Shapiro 1998, p.547; Mayer 1995; Morris & Morberg 1994). However, as Balkin's (1990, pp.1626-1627) logocentric analyses demonstrates, trust is a fusion of the intangible and the emotive. When broken, it evokes irrational responses akin to an 'axe' that the electorate need to grind. Simply put, when trust is lost, a feeling of betrayal actively stimulates political actors to seek change.

This was illustrated by Labour Party members across Norfolk in a recent survey. 79% of respondents agreed that the failure of the party leadership at a certain point during their membership led to a loss of trust and evoked betrayal. Those who were critical of Corbyn keenly reported how hostility to Labour's 'broad church' had left them betrayed and unable to trust the current leadership. Likewise, those who were more positive towards Corbyn consistently referred to Blair's 2003 invasion of Iraq and flexible use of the private sector in healthcare as clear instances of betrayal. Crucially, these respondents demonstrate how a loss of trust can stimulate change. For some, actively supporting Corbyn for leadership was considered an act of retribution, whilst those currently feeling betrayed confirmed their intention to vote for the anti-Corbyn candidate in future leadership elections.

This process is not problematic in and of itself. However, when considered alongside the unique contextual development of the Labour Party, it has the potential to consolidate two distinct policy narratives whilst limiting the emergence of alternative ideas.



CONTESTED AIMS

The Labour Party is underpinned by a variety of ideological positions that have 'no counterpart' within any other party (Seyd 1987, p.3). This is best expressed in the contestation over Clause IV of the Labour Party's constitution. A 'rallying cry', for Fielding (1995, p.33), it is the closest the party has come to a defined set of aims. However, this clause does not equate to a uniformity in regards to the party's aims.

On the contrary, the specificity of the party's aims have been marred by debates between those who seek revolutionary change, and those who accept our 'un-revolutionary' society (Lyman 1965, p.147). This debate is best illustrated with reference to contested interpretations over the party's past electoral successes. These expose a core diametric conflict. For instance, some within the party celebrate Clement Attlee's Socialist 'overhaul' of society (Dale 2000, p.51). In contrast, others draw attention to the Attlee government's pragmatic acknowledgment of private ownership (Coates 2003, p.7). Similarly, theorists like Richards (1998, pp.33-34) comparatively analyse Blair's pragmatic 1997 manifesto with Harold Wilson's in 1966, though Blair (O'Hara & Parr 2006, p.478) argued that the latter lacked 'verve' and betrayed the Labour movement's tradition of globalisation. Whilst there is contestation, the literature clearly distills these disparate ideological positions into a core tension between fundamentalists and moderates (Sarbin, Carney, Eoyang 1994, pp.163-187). Indeed, a familiar conflict emerges between traditional socialists and social democrats (Fielding 1993, p.33). Essentially, the importance of this conflict is that away from abstract notions of social justice, there is clearly little agreement on the scope of the party's aims when in government with two defined, yet distinct, interpretations emerging.

As demonstrated, the members of the Labour Party hold great sway over the party's future direction. However, clearly members are both emotively driven and divided over the party's fundamental aims. In this unique context, the process of changing leader becomes an opportunity to enact retribution, impelled by lack a trust and dictated by an overwhelming sense of betrayal. When combined, the party's contestation of its aims and the centrality of retribution to membership consolidate the disparate ideological views into a core diametric. Ultimately, this limits the extent of alternative policy narratives.

Clause IV

"The Labour Party is a democratic socialist Party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few; where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe and where we live together freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect."

(Labour Party Rulebook 2019, p.3)

Q1 Consolidating a diametric

Indeed, when combined in the context of a leadership election, reason gives way to retribution. The issues with this are twofold. Firstly, this process of change reinforces the twin tenets of views that have dominated the Labour Party's history, creating a culture of sectarianism (Hayter 2005, p.4). In such a context, retribution means that leadership elections are less about supporting alternative policy agendas, but increasingly concerned with depriving competitors of power (Hayter 2005, p.4). Indeed, referring back to the survey of members across Norfolk, Traditional Socialist respondents were motivated more by their distrust of social democrats than by the desire for a radical policy alternative. For example, one respondent detailed how the lack of commitment to common ownership and the adoption of 'privatisation' under Andy Burnham, the then Secretary of State for Health, left them so betrayed they consciously 'did not vote for him in the leadership contest'. Indeed, the respondents who voted for Corbyn in the 2015 leadership election claimed that his appeal lay in his grassroots approach, in response to the increasing centralisation of the party under Blair (Stafford, p.72). Similarly, Social Democrats expressed a desire for the anyone-but-Corbyn candidate, opting for the tried-and-tested proponents of New Labour instead of seeking a genuinely new approach for Labour. A 16 year old member indicated their unhappiness with Corbyn's 'anti-semitic associations', whilst a 24 year old member indicated their desire to 'defeat the hard left' at the next leadership election in response to feeling 'disgusted' with the party's handling of the issue. Evidently, decisions over leadership have less to do with the likelihood of winning power for the party, and more to do with who can establish power within the party. The outcome of this is that party engages in a perpetual disagreement over its aims, and results in a tyranny of the majority. In essence, changes of leadership are a reaction against the past, not a response to the future.

Q2: Retribution over policy

Secondly, this distills the breadth of views into a distinct diametric that excludes alternative policy narratives. This is clearly happening. Lisa Nandy, whose interest in towns presents arguably the most nuanced campaign, has been overshadowed, whilst the most experienced candidate, Emily Thornberry has failed to secure a place on the ballot, with the election becoming a 'monolithic' battle between the moderate Keir Starmer and continuity candidate Rebecca Long-Bailey (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-51390672>). Clearly, an overt concern with retribution is inhibiting the intellectual and ideological development of alternative policy positions, limiting the options to a contest between moderates versus fundamentalists. Outside of these positions, narratives that lack an ideological legacy, similar to Miliband's *One Nation Labour*, have great difficulty breaking the stranglehold of 'old' versus 'new'. The result: a party that swings between two defined positions, unable to respond to future issues, and destined to languish in opposition.

Q3: Impacts

In regards to the impacts of this emotively driven decision making, the researcher noted a considerable number of references to hostility as being the outcome of betrayal and retribution. This hostility was split into two dominant areas. This partially drew on the 'ideologically pure' attitudes of Corbyn supporters, and their 'inflexible' and 'upsetting' intolerance of the broad church. Going further, a respondent specifically referred to the attitude of 'calling people Blairites' and 'traitors' as 'reminiscent of abusive relationships' that ultimately impacted upon their mental health. As an indication that this member sought retribution, they admit that this atmosphere led them to vote for Owen Smith in the 2016 leadership challenge. This provides further evidence of the underlying motivation for retribution that guides party members. The researcher experienced this hostility first hand whilst conducting an interview with a self-identified traditional socialist. Requesting anonymity, they characterised Blair as a 'lapping poodle' with a 'disgusting grin', supported by 'lickspittle reporters'. Keen to criticise social democracy personally, the respondent was limited on detailed explanations, whilst another simply wrote of New Labour, 'the B-liar government', again failing to pinpoint an exact failure to meet expectations. On the contrary, a keen advocate of social democracy was equally critical of traditional socialism though referred only to its perceived policy failures and approach to Labour's broad church, suggesting the party was in 'terminal decline'. This is not the only example, with a female member reporting claims of personal sexism at branch meetings that according to her, 'would have made union blokes blush'. Further responses from North Norfolk continue this trend. A former Labour Chairman of North Norfolk District Council reported feeling increasing 'disaffected, unwanted, unappreciated' in the local party, specifically blaming a clique of Corbyn supporters. He confirmed that in the likelihood of another leadership election, he would seek retribution by voting for the 'person would stop me being disaffected [...] and feeling the way I am now'. Overall, this demonstrates that the reliance on long-held values has created a culture of sectarianism within the LP, confirming Hayter's (2005, p.4) assessment suggesting that betrayal is no longer defined by specific policy outcomes or failed expectations, but instead by personal hostilities.

“Blair with his disgusting grin, going around being the lapping poodle for American power”

This has consequences for the future of the Labour Party. Indeed, in such a context, leadership elections are still seen as a way to enact retribution, but this is less about supporting alternative policy agendas, and increasingly concerned with depriving competitors of power thereby preventing compromise. As such, given the dominance of these factions, and their concern only with exerting power within the party, alternative debates that seek to develop policy in response to perceived failures may be unable to develop. On a broad level, this alludes to the difficulties that non-established positions within the party have in terms of establishing their intellectual and ideological development.

The Labour Party: “Well meaning; knackered; hopelessly divided; possibly in terminal decline”

Q4: Possible changes

- Firstly, greater research needs to be conducted into the possible intergenerational discord of Labour Party members. The research conducted for this article hinted at how for younger members, the established diametric of views is increasingly irrelevant. This gives some hope for the emergence of an alternative policy narrative as either New Labour nor Old Labour holds the answers to the questions young people prioritise. Any potential leadership candidate must consider issues with fresh thinking and approach them with big ideas.
- Secondly, party members need to understand the value of compromise. Often in politics, compromise is regarded as failure and a betrayal. Changing the narrative around policy promises and policy outcomes is an essential first step in softening the language around compromise. Public Policy research often highlights the benefits of compromise, with theories like Rational Choice Institutionalism positing this as the end-goal. In answer to one respondent in North Norfolk, there is no ‘winner-takes-all’ theory of change. Understanding that lesson should encourage members to stop seeking retribution and instead use their power to promote alternative ideas. Alongside this, any leadership candidate must forgo the tendency to promote ideological purity. A potential starting point is to publicly re-evaluate the National Health Service. Far from a socialist achievement, the NHS should be celebrated as a compromise between pragmatic Social Democrats and Modern Liberals in response to a clear societal issue.

- Thirdly, the Labour Party needs to define and redefine what it stands for. In any context, external actors such as historians and theorists will continue debate outcomes and achievements - and this should be celebrated. However, as is clear, until internal actors move beyond the contested accounts of the party's past, these will continue to overwhelmingly determine future policy. Instead of learning from the past, the party will be limited to offering a simple diametric of 'Old' or 'New'. At the core of the issue is the party's Clause IV. This is undoubtedly a crucial statement of the party's aims and values. However, it was last revised in 1994 - a world different to our own. One suggestion would be for special conferences of party members and officials held on a periodic basis to debate and rewrite the clause. This would ensure the party's fundamental aims were responsive, and would reduce any temptation to use the clause as a marker of historical precedent in such a way as to bind the hands of future leaders. Without prior agreement over what the party stands for, Labour will be destined to react only to its membership, and not respond to the needs of the wider electorate.

CONCLUSION

What is clear is that historic changes in the Labour Party, in regards to its direction and leadership, can be attributed to betrayal of values and a resultant retribution through supporting alternative candidates. Secondly, the Labour Party is divided between two prominent factions: social democrats and traditional socialists. Such a diametric relies heavily on identity and long-held values. Indeed, the expected aims of these factions have evolved from divergent interpretations of Clause VI, and a failure to outline a clear doctrine. Ultimately, after establishing a new narrative in 2010, Ed Miliband's *One Nation Labour* failed to integrate itself into the party owing to its lack of ideological character. Indeed, whilst the current diametric of views may be resilient, it is ultimately preventing alternative narratives from emerging. In reflection of the party's recent electoral performance, any leadership candidate must attempt to break the diametric to actively respond to the societal issues facing the country. Ultimately, the issue is not with the direction that the Labour Party chooses, but instead the motivations of those who are pushing the Labour Party in that given direction.

The Labour Party is the only party best placed to embrace change, and with the threat of Brexit and the climate crisis, the party is needed now more than ever. In 1945, Clement Attlee responded to the changes in society and celebrated consensus when establishing the NHS, in 1964 Harold Wilson celebrated the white heat of technology, and in 1997 things only got better. In 2019, Labour needs to learn that a combination of compromise and consensus leads to change; ideological purity and retribution however has rewarded Boris Johnson with his majority.

Methodology

RESEARCH AIMS:

This study was concerned with the key motivations stimulating actors within the Labour Party. Three main sets of hypotheses were formulated based on a literature review. The first set focused on the impact of identity, specifically, if and how a member's long-held values shape their pivotal expectations. The second set aimed to confirm how far prior changes in direction are explainable through reference to betrayal and retribution. The final set of hypotheses aimed to offer insight into the future direction of the Labour Party by exploring whether alternative identities are able to manifest. Specifically, this posits a new discord between activists in the context of Brexit, and explores if it is capable of surpassing the importance of the traditional diametric.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND SAMPLING

An initial sample of Constituency Labour Party's was taken. Judgement sampling, whereby the researcher selected the units based on their knowledge, was used to select two relevant CLPs. These were the North Norfolk Constituency Labour Party ("NNCLP"), and the Norwich Labour Party ("NLP").

Inclusion criteria and considerations:

- Norfolk Constituency Labour Parties;
- Younger members (of which NLP has a high proportion); and,
- Geographically accessible.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Literature on data collection highlights the choice between qualitative or quantitative data as being key when conducting social research (Robson 2011, p.17). In short the quantitative route essentially follows a similar research path to the natural sciences, involving measurable data sets. However, qualitative researchers stress that a reliance on statistics overlooks social and political contexts (Marsh & Stoker 2010, p.269). As such, a hybrid model was used combining both statistical and detailed responses.

DATA COLLECTION

This project took the form of a basic survey over a four week period starting on the twenty-ninth of July, two-thousand and nineteen. Owing to the multi-strategy approach, a combination of research questions were used. Closed questions were used to generate an ordinal level of measurement (Ruane 2005, p.133). However, given the emphasis on generating detailed answers, open ended questions were also employed, the benefits of these being that they led to unanticipated and personal responses (Ruane, p.132).

Combined, 35 responses were gathered, of which 30 were online interviews and 5 were conducted face-to-face.

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