

# New Labour in Power: Five Problems of Contemporary History

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## Abstract

The history of New Labour is highly politicised, deployed either for its policy lessons (good or bad) or as a weapon in Labour's factional struggles. But, just as historians in the 1990s reassessed the premierships of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, so the distance of time and the opening of archives offers an opportunity to reappraise New Labour as history. Such work raises five methodological challenges: the lack of sufficient distance from the subject to tell whether policy innovations will remain popular and permanent; the long shadow the Iraq war casts over this whole period; the deluge of data and sources available; the continuing and controversial part that key actors, such as Tony Blair, are still playing; and the lack of expertise any one author will inevitably face in some policy areas. This article addresses each of those difficulties in turn.

**Keywords:** New Labour, Labour Party, Tony Blair, public policy, historiography, methodology

NEW LABOUR presents some acute problems for the historian. It is never easy to write the history of any government, such is the inevitable process of winnowing out the important and the ephemeral, narrowing down the focus to key personalities, policies, moments and crises. But the present author's attempt to write a history of New Labour's domestic policies under Tony Blair—in particular while that party was in government between 1997 and 2007—has thrown up a number of especially troublesome dilemmas difficulties general to all recent British history, but also peculiar to Blair's era of political dominance.

All governments contain paradoxes and contradictions. Trying to squeeze them into a single mould is all but impossible, contributing to the sense that political history has become more fractured and less coherent over recent decades. What we really need for each administration is a series of books akin to the three-volume series published by Manchester University Press on Harold Wilson's governments of 1964–70.<sup>1</sup> Any premiership, and any

party's time in office, necessarily contains multitudes—a fact that has perhaps served to dissuade historians from an interest in public affairs 'at the centre' that can seem old-fashioned and not in keeping with the devolved, dynamic and populist trends transforming the modern United Kingdom. Clement Attlee's domestic reformism was, for instance, supposed to complement an intensely global, and to some extent imperial, vision of what the UK could achieve on the world stage. But the financial demands of the Korean war (and building Britain's atomic bomb) to some extent stalled any second stage of social reforms following devaluation and the austerity of the late 1940s.<sup>2</sup> The new imperial and domestic settlements could not, in the end, quite support each other.

Even so, Attlee could never have won his landslide if Labour had been committed to shuttering the empire and retreating into autarky. Unstable coalitions and aims are in fact the norm in politics. Margaret Thatcher

J. Tomlinson, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970, vol. 3: Economic Policy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>A nuanced approach is taken to this question in J. Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy: The Attlee Years, 1945–1951*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 287–9.

<sup>1</sup>S. Fielding, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970, vol. 1: Cultural Change*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003; J. W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970, vol. 2: International Policy*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003;

needed to win the votes of both social conservatives and economic liberals, as the Brexit Leave campaign also understood later on. John Major and David Cameron had to manage much of Thatcher's legacy while blunting its cutting edge—attempting to build 'a nation at ease with itself' or a 'compassionate Conservatism' even while reducing public spending, to the consternation of many more ideological Conservatives.<sup>3</sup> Rigorous, detailed and empirical study of the many faces these governments presented is difficult and often unrewarding, conducted even today in physical archives that can be geographically dispersed. At the same time, our political parties seem more and more like vehicles for their members' views than governing machines. Small wonder that innovative histories of participatory politics, popular culture, particular incidents and specific places have risen to challenge political history's claim to tell a synoptic, overriding narrative. Still, the effort can and must continue to be made, if only to understand the reasons behind and, therefore, the course of government policies which continue to have a huge impact on the public.

The course of political history, narrowly defined, remained confusing even while Blair was Labour's leader between 1994 and 2007—and, for a while, carried all before him. New Labour sought to fuse market, state and civic society in a self-consciously novel effort to support social and economic mobility in an age of globalisation.<sup>4</sup> It met with varying degrees of success, as opponents on left and right picked away respectively at both ends of its rhetoric: its emphasis on the value of

work rather than welfare, on the one hand, and its insistence on reducing what it defined as 'social exclusion', on the other. To some extent, covering so much of the ideological waterfront is what makes any governing coalition successful, but as this article argues it also poses challenges for the author attempting to write political histories of the present.

Blair and his allies for a while completely dominated British political life and, therefore, exhibited the opportunities and risks of attracting support of such scale and scope more acutely than most. Blair himself adroitly appealed to both authoritarians and social liberals with his famous pledge to be 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. He posed as world statesman with President Clinton over Kosovo, and dad-next-door with his Ford Galaxy people carrier, guitar and mug of tea. He was visionary when discussing an integrated world economy and the opportunities granted by education, but detailed, practical and pragmatic when it came to individual policies. Blairism and Blair contained preacher and technocrat, seer and manager. All that makes the course of events under his leadership difficult, sometimes bewildering, for the historian to follow—let alone grasp and explain.

## Challenges: the New Labour era as history

This article lays out five areas in which the author's commission to write a domestic history of the Blair ministry has proved acutely difficult. The first is relatively banal, but important for any exercise in contemporary political history: it is still very early to reach considered, balanced judgements as to the impact of many Blair policies. Some of the key architecture of the New Labour era remains—a national minimum wage, for instance—and seems to have become an established part of the UK's political economy. But other elements, for instance human rights law or the hybrid public-private partnership on the railways managed by Network Rail, remain matters of intense controversy. Who can tell how long any of it will last, or what it will mean in the long run?

In Scotland, if pro-independence forces eventually carry the day, New Labour's policy

<sup>3</sup>Some standard and accessible texts on these governments are P. Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945–1951*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1992; J. Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher, vol. 2: The Iron Lady*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2003; K. Hickson and B. Williams, eds., *John Major: An Unsuccessful Prime Minister? Reappraising John Major*, London, Biteback, 2017; and A. Seldon and P. Snowdon, *Cameron at 10: The Verdict*, London, William Collins, 2016.

<sup>4</sup>Two among the voluminous attempts to match New Labour's language and sense of history up against its actual policies are available in V. Bryson and P. Fisher, eds., *Redefining Social Justice: New Labour, Rhetoric and Reality*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011; and O. Daddow, *New Labour and the European Union: Blair and Brown's Logic of History*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011.

of devolution may be seen as a historic mistake. If they do not, the recreation of a Scottish Parliament might seem like a far-sighted reinforcement of the Union. It is simply too soon to tell. The same point might be made about the durability of the constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland, and the relative peace it has enjoyed since the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement of 1998. Even so, working in the space where new official documents are released, and in the gap between contemporary political history and journalism, does demonstrate the continuing value and necessity of political history.

A second challenge for the historian is the strong association of Blair's government with one word: Iraq. Blair became very unpopular indeed after he left office—in contradistinction to his mostly strong ratings while prime minister—and it is very hard to see beyond foreign policy when writing about his government.<sup>5</sup> The disaster that the governance of Iraq became following the second Gulf war to some extent serves as a lightning rod for latent dislike of what many voters came to see as Blair's slickness and false promises. Looking beyond this, to real achievements in office as well as the true flaws of each policy, can be difficult when faced with a storm of abusive debate on social media, all part of Labour's 'forever wars' with itself.

The legacy of Iraq poisoned the reputation of 'New' Labour within the Labour Party in the medium to longer term, helping to crystallise many left-wing activists' sense of unease with its wider aims and methods. A sense of betrayal, or at least disappointment, had remained the preserve of a far-left fringe up until the point when Iraq imploded, but such charges gained a new and much more emotionally freighted currency thereafter. First, Ed Miliband's leadership of Labour disavowed some New Labour shibboleths, for instance the private finance initiative (PFI), while also witnessing an explicit attack on the Iraq war.<sup>6</sup> Then, between 2015 and 2020,

<sup>5</sup>In January 2022, only 14 per cent of Britons approved of Blair being granted a knighthood, while 63 per cent disapproved, YouGov, 4 January 2022; <https://twitter.com/yougov/status/1478382951851249677?lang=en-GB>.

<sup>6</sup>'Ed Miliband defends Iraq War condemnation', *BBC News Online*, 29 September 2010; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-11433643>.

Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the party constituted not just a critique of or answer to Blair's ideas, but a full-court rejection of their effects, intent and good faith.

'Blairism' and 'Blairite' thereafter became rather dirty words in the hands of the most aggressive Corbynite activists, while Brown and Blair's domestic achievements at least on occasion became a rallying point for those who opposed the Corbyn movement. Thus, Tom Watson made his famous appeal to the Blair (and Brown) legacy in his 2016 conference speech as deputy leader, signalling his deep unhappiness at the party's direction of travel; and more recently, Keir Starmer deployed Blair to make his own case ahead of the 2022 local elections, demonstrating his continued move away from the policies and tenor of the Corbyn period.<sup>7</sup>

All this makes any recovery of the true nature, effects and legacy of Blair's actions much more difficult. Given the heat rather than light shed by this 'debate', it becomes harder to investigate the actual effects of any policy in a balanced manner. The allegations thrown around in Labour's history wars—that Blair subverted or even betrayed the party's egalitarian objectives, that his domestic and foreign policies were of a single 'neoliberal' character, that the economic growth of the time was a chimaera based only on a banking and property bubble—often stand in for thought.<sup>8</sup> Strong defences of Blair's record, often constructed polemically to counter these crude approaches, also run the risk of discrediting more dispassionate retrospectives.

Many elements in the New Labour programme have been lost to the Labour

<sup>7</sup>'Tom Watson's speech to Annual Conference, 2016', 27 September 2016; <https://www.policyforum.labour.org.uk/news/tom-watson-s-speech-to-annual-conference-2016>;

H. Zeffman, 'Tony Blair backs Keir Starmer in Labour Party campaign video', *The Times*, 1 May 2022.

<sup>8</sup>P. McDuff, 'Blair built on Thatcher's legacy. That's a simple fact', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2020; S. Metcalf, 'Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world', *The Guardian*, 18 August 2017; D. Philips and G. Whannel, 'Neoliberalism and New Labour: from Thatcher to Blair', in D. Philips and G. Whannel, *The Trojan Horse: The Growth of Commercial Sponsorship*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, pp. 67–96.

movement's memory, or more widely to the public's recall, owing to this phenomenon of intra-party, factional or partisan score-settling. Only if we leave these hyper-motivated battles behind can we quantify the effects of redistributive taxation and tax credits in reducing poverty, in a context of only limited progress on inequality overall; or understand the strides made in expanding access to higher education, at some cost in terms of charging fees to attend university; or lay out how Labour courted public opinion with much higher spending on public services, but seemed to lose support over high levels of immigration; or explore social policies that sought to support families, but also judge and punish 'anti-social behaviour'. 'New' Labour often spoke with a voice designed to placate right-wing newspapers, while to some extent covertly acting quite differently in terms of actual policy. Endless 'tough' (and often short-lived) anti-crime initiatives were announced by the same ministers who boosted drug treatment and reduced rough sleeping.<sup>9</sup> The strongly Janus-faced attitudes to these questions displayed by New Labour of course make these debates all the sharper.

The third challenge is methodological. Although all historians have in recent years had to deal with the increasing number of (often web-based and digitised) sources, the nearer one's research approaches the present, the more this becomes a matter of painful selection and impossible workloads rather than an opportunity to know and understand more. It is a commonplace that Blair's style of 'sofa government' often meant that the core executive left fewer formal records behind than previous administrations. But in many areas of actual policy, the historian faces a superfluity—not a shortage—of sources. The National Archive's online repository of UK

government web pages and downloadable reports is just one example: parliamentary papers and debates, online newspapers, newly-available official papers released under the twenty-year rule, data from the Office for National Statistics and author interviews with ministers and other policy makers are others.<sup>10</sup>

A fourth point concerns the shifting personalities of key actors at the heart of the New Labour project. Many of the most powerful people involved are still alive and still active in politics, at least to the extent of making public interventions from time to time. Blair himself always displayed a measure of technophilia: witness his enthusiasm for the world wide web and what it could do for schools while in opposition, or advocacy for the policy potential of biometric identity cards late in his premiership.<sup>11</sup> Recently, his pronouncements have moved further in this direction, as he has intervened to emphasise the world-reshaping importance of new types of vaccine, electric cars and artificial intelligence.<sup>12</sup> This forces the historian to ask: to what extent were these more important themes than they seemed at the time? Were they more central than they appeared?

The same could be said of other New Labour luminaries. Alastair Campbell, Blair's official spokesperson and director of communications

<sup>10</sup>The present author has reflected on these themes when it comes to the increased availability of statistics: see T. Crook and G. O'Hara, 'Towards new histories of an enumerated people', in idem, eds., *Statistics and the Public Sphere: Numbers and the People in Modern Britain, c.1800–2000*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, pp. 264–70.

<sup>11</sup>While still Leader of the Opposition, in 1995 Blair announced a deal with British Telecom to connect every British school to the world wide web: see M. White, 'Blair wants "to make UK young again"', *The Guardian*, 1 October 1995.

<sup>12</sup>See 'Tony Blair speech: the future of Britain in an era of the three revolutions', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 20 January 2022; <https://www.institute.global/insights/news/tony-blair-speech-future-britain-era-three-revolutions>. Blair's emphasis on the importance of science for policy making is most recently on display in 'William Hague and Tony Blair: "science is the single issue all our dreams depend on"', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 22 February 2023; <https://www.institute.global/insights/economic-prosperity/william-hague-and-tony-blair-science-single-issue-all-our-dreams-depend>.

<sup>9</sup>A good guide to (for instance) New Labour's egalitarian taxation policies is J. Browne and D. Phillips, *Tax and Benefit Reforms Under Labour*, London, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010, for example, fig. 3.7, p. 24; long-term trends in income inequality can be followed in, for example, Office for National Statistics, 'Household income inequality, UK: financial year ending 2020'; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2020>.

between 1997 and 2003, has become increasingly identified with the pro-European cause, particularly after Leave's victory in the 2016 Brexit referendum.<sup>13</sup> Gordon Brown's work after leaving Number Ten often centred around education in the developing world; David Miliband, one of Blair's schools ministers between 2002 and 2004 and later foreign secretary, has gone on to head the International Rescue Committee charity in New York.<sup>14</sup> To what extent might this move the EU, or debt forgiveness for poorer countries, higher up our agenda when we study New Labour? The answer is by no means clear—focus too much on later developments and we run the risk of extreme present-mindedness and seeing the story backwards. Miss these obvious preoccupations and the role of the individual's latent interests and ideas, later more obvious, could be missed.

The influence of such luminaries is hard to contextualise, given the dominance of diaries and memoirs. Campbell's own extremely detailed diaries, Blair's and Mandelson's autobiographies, and the voluminous output of journalists reporting on clashes of personality and ambition, as demonstrated by Andrew Rawnsley's indispensable *Servants of the People* and *End of the Party*, have all encouraged a 'high political' or Westminster-based look back at these years.<sup>15</sup> Much else amidst the literature covering 1997 to 2007 is very dry policy-orientated work by think tanks and policy analysts, such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies (on tax and spending), the Resolution Foundation (on living standards), the King's Fund (on healthcare) and the like.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Campbell has reflected on these developments in a witness interview with The UK in a Changing Europe, see 'Alastair Campbell', 5 March 2021; <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/brexit-witness-archive/alastair-campbell/>.

<sup>14</sup>'Global education', The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown; <https://gordonandsarahbrown.com/campaign/global-education/>; 'David Miliband: IRC President', International Rescue Committee; <https://www.rescue.org/uk/david-miliband>.

<sup>15</sup>A. Rawnsley, *Servants of the People: The Inside story of New Labour*, London, Penguin, 2001; A. Rawnsley, *The End of the Party*, London, Penguin, 2010.

<sup>16</sup>In addition to the IFS study cited above, see, for example, R. Thorlby and J. Maybin, *A High-Performing NHS? A Review of Progress 1997–2010*, London, The King's Fund, 2010.

That has led to the evacuation of what might—hopefully unironically—be seen as the 'middle ground' in contemporary history writing: work that holds together an awareness of the importance of personalities, particularly the Blair-Brown rivalry that lay at the heart of this strange dual monarchy of a government, with both structural trends and policy effectiveness. The voluminous material available *either* as personal memory and reflection *or* collections of charts and tables could militate against an approach that can mobilise both.

Fifth and last, and to come back to the beginning of this article, 'the domestic politics of the Blair government' is a very wide subject. It is very likely far too wide for one book, written by one historian, even while excluding all foreign policy and much domestic policy with a foreign policy dimension—Northern Ireland, for instance, the vast majority of the UK's engagement with the EU, or the impact of trade globalisation under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation. Consider some of the subjects any such book will still have to cover and what might be reduced to a subordinate role as it moves through the headline topics: income distribution and in-work benefits; policing and security; immigration and the labour market; youth and family policy; the reshaping of schools' governance, accountability and curriculum; the effectiveness of allowing NHS patients and doctors to access the private sector, albeit in a very limited way; the mechanics of public opinion; and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Other subjects that may have to be left for others, owing to word length as much as anything else, will probably be: devolution in Scotland and Wales; transport policy; reform

<sup>17</sup>Among a vast literature, studies of the last three topics include S. J. Ball and K. Clarke, "Going further?" Tony Blair and New Labour education policies", in K. Clarke, T. Maltby and P. Kennett, eds., *Social Policy Review 19: Analysis and Debate in Social Policy 2007*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2007, pp. 13–32; W. Beckert and E. Kelly, 'Divided by choice? For-profit providers, patient choice and mechanisms of patient sorting in the English National Health Service', *Health Economics*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2021, pp. 820–39; E. F. Heath, R. M. Jowell and J. Curtice, *The Rise of New Labour: Party Policies and Voter Choices*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

of the constitution, including freedom of information and reform of the House of Lords; and much of the thrust of regional policy. Often the areas left out have been—or will be—more than adequately covered by better-qualified writers. In a book mainly covering New Labour's economic and social policies, outlining the key debates and texts, even if briefly, will probably be more helpful to the reader than addressing them briefly and inexpertly in a book the main points of which lie elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Even so, there is a danger that 'the domestic policies of the Blair government' might become 'the performance of public services in England under Blair', which is not the same thing at all.

Any historian tackling these themes will be pulled into areas on which they are simply not expert, and will have to rely on the secondary literature for guidance. To what extent was Labour's emphasis on head teachers' school leadership justified? How many targets, how tightly enforced, are likely to improve public sector performance? Just how significant were high levels of immigration in weakening or dissolving many traditional Labour voters' ties with the party? These questions have once again been covered by many experts and the writer taking up a broad theme will have to lean on them all.

Two further problems then arise. The first is not understanding quite what the more specialist writer is arguing, perhaps in highly technical language or based in a sub-discipline unfamiliar to the generalist historian. The second difficulty is that the policy writer cannot possibly replicate or challenge all these results (on the distributional effects of tax credits, perhaps, or the effectiveness or otherwise of measures to tackle 'anti-social behaviour'). These must be taken to some extent on trust, though challenged and tested by what civil servants and ministers knew at the time, evidenced in their public pronouncements, recorded in

declassified official files or remembered in interviews.

## Conclusions: kaleidoscopic histories?

Overall, the problem of writing the history of the Blair government reflects the nature of New Labour, and perhaps most contemporary political history itself. 'Blairite' initiatives were and are kaleidoscopic responses to an increasingly fractured and post-modern electoral and policy landscape—one that could show the public and party many faces, very rapidly. Social democracy, communitarianism, Christian socialism, Catholic social teaching, Labourist insights from New Left to Old Right, liberal individualism, collectivist statism and quasi-marketeering new public management: all jostled for their place, among other ideas, inside this coalition.<sup>19</sup> Grasping that range of ideas might, however, show how important political history remains, inculcating a frankness about how opaque New Labour could be, how ragged the edges of our work might remain and how synthetic some of the treatment in a general book might be. Contemporary political history thus becomes a craft and an ongoing, perhaps stuttering task, rather than a smooth summation, conclusion or endpoint.

In the end, the student of New Labour is forced most of all to be honest and, in order to do so, must expose the 'hidden wiring'—not just of Westminster and Whitehall, but of their own writing.<sup>20</sup> Where the very long-term significance of policies is still opaque, that should be made clear; where Labour's history wars impinge, the author's own personal views (in this case, a sympathetic, but critical, stance somewhat to the left of New Labour) admitted. The huge amount of evidence available, and the short time since Blair left office,

<sup>19</sup>See on the range of influences, in this case on public service reform: C. Needham, *The Reform of Public Services under New Labour: Narratives of Consumerism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

<sup>20</sup>The phrase 'hidden wiring' comes from the title of P. Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1995; an idea utilised in A. Blick and P. Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring Emerges: The Cabinet Manual and the Working of the British Constitution*, London, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2011.

<sup>18</sup>On devolution during the Blair years, see J. Bradbury, *Constitutional Policy and Territorial Politics in the UK, vol. 1: Union and Devolution 1997–2007*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2021; for the later impact of Scottish devolution and the transformation of Scottish politics, one might consult G. Hassan and S. Barrow, eds., *A Nation Changed? The SNP and Scotland Ten Years On*, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2017.

can only allow of a very partial and provisional view anyway.

Beyond that, tackling the domestic policies of New Labour requires the political and policy historian to be able to master much of the policy literature, while integrating personal diaries, memoirs and contemporary journalistic accounts into an overall picture—blending them together in a single assessment that also contains much in the way of analysis. Where the text leans on the work of others, that should be rapidly and honestly evident to the reader too: here, phrases which make

clear that ‘experts’ disagree about lots in the way of policy detail, and full, transparent footnotes or endnotes, will perhaps be vital. Most of all, as this article has argued, what might be thought of as the physical and mechanical underpinnings or scaffold supporting both narrative and judgement should be exposed—a brutalist, but hopefully not brutal, approach to the political history of the very recent past.

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