Is the Left/Right Distinction Still Relevant? 
A Theoretical Appraisal and Application to New Labour in Great Britain

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Abstract

Does the left/right ideological distinction continue to matter? What does it mean today? And, if it does matter, where would New Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair fall on this ideological spectrum? This paper constructs a theory of the left/right ideological distinction, building upon the recent path-breaking work of Norberto Bobbio. I argue, following Bobbio, that the left/right distinction continues to be relevant for understanding the major ideological and policy issues in contemporary politics and the respective stances on these issues adopted by rival political parties. I then proceed to a careful examination of the ideological and policy stances of New Labour since their coming to power in the 1997 British general election. Based upon party organization and conference documents, policy proposals, and policy implementation, I assess the degree of the rightward ideological shift that New Labour has adopted. I find that in fact there is a qualitative difference between New and Old Labour, and that a clear convergence between the Labour party and the more right-oriented British parties can be identified. I finish with an
evaluation of what this means for the state of political discourse and electoral politics in Britain today.


Introduction

The assertion that there is no longer any relevance to the distinction between left and right which, over the two centuries since the French Revolution, has been used to divide the political universe into opposing camps, has been made repeatedly in recent years to the point of becoming a cliché (Bobbio 1996). Contra to such an assertion I would argue, rather, that far from having lost their relevance, the stakes to which the left and the right allude are more pertinent than ever (Mouffe 2000, 127). I shall employ political philosopher Norberto Bobbio’s *Left & Right: The Significance of Political Distinction* (1996) in an effort to counter the recent trend towards the suppression of the left/right distinction. Bobbio sets out, first to refute the idea that the left/right distinction is in any way a thing of the past, and then to argue for his own definition of that distinction. I argue, following Bobbio, that the criterion most effectively used to distinguish between the left and the right is their attitude to the ideal of equality: the left tends towards equality and the right towards inequality.

Bobbio will provide the theoretical basis for my analysis of New Labour in Britain under the leadership of Tony Blair. I intend to demonstrate not only the qualitative difference between New and Old Labour, but also the normative similarities between the New Labour movement and Thatcherism. I hope to expose the fatuousness of New Labour’s claim to have transcended the traditional political distinction between left and right by carefully examining the ideological and policy stances of New Labour since their coming to power in the 1997 British general election. Upon recognizing the convergence between New Labour and the more right-oriented British parties, I address what this means for the state of political discourse and electoral politics in Britain today.

In Britain, the strategy of New Labour seems almost modeled on Bobbio’s definition of a third way based on submerging the left/right distinction and somehow attempting to transcend it (Bobbio 1996, xx). Since its 1997 victory, New Labour has begun to market itself as a radical movement, a movement representing a “third way” between social democracy and neo-liberalism (Mouffe 2000, 108). Labeled as Tony Blair’s “intellectual guru” (Lipset 2001, 74), Anthony Giddens attempts to theorize this supposedly new model for “modern politics” (Giddens 2000) in a

Grasping the fundamental flaws of the “third way” requires coming to terms with the conflictual nature of politics and the “ineradicability of antagonism,” which is precisely what the increasingly fashionable “third way” approach is at pains to deny (Mouffe 2000, xii). Blair suggests that “[t]he totalizing ideologies of left and right no longer hold much purchase” (Heffernan 2000, 135).[1] Blair’s main achievement was to redefine the entire ethos or culture of the Labour party. New Labour’s “modernization” involved the creation, in effect, of a new party (Kavanagh 1997a, 534; Kavanagh 1997b, 217), a party clearly intent on pursuing a neo-liberal agenda. In Britain, the moral claims of social democracy have been watered down “until they become very general claims about taking responsibility for ourselves and each other…” (Finlayson 1999, 272), and my analysis of recent New Labour policy proposals and policy implementation will reflect this rightward ideological shift. Characterized as a “Thatcher in trousers” (Hobsbawm 2000, 107), Tony Blair and his program of “modernization” betrays many of the primary tenets associated with orthodox social democracy and reflects instead a position informed by Labour’s accommodation to and adoption of Thatcherism’s neo-liberal political agenda (Heffernan 2000, 178).

### The Challenge To The Left/Right

*Distinction and Its Survival*

Irrespective of future events, left and right now have an existence which is independent of the framework in which they originally developed. They have conquered the planet. They have become universal political categories. They are part of the basic notions which generally inform the way contemporary societies work.

--Marcel Gauchet, *La Droite et la gauche*

“Left” and “Right,” Bobbio argues, are two antithetical terms used habitually to signify the contrast between ideologies and movements which divide the world of political thought and action. As antithetical terms, they are mutually exclusive in the sense that no movement can be both “on the left” and “on the right” at the same time. Bobbio refers to this polarizing distinction as a dyad, by which he means a “distinction covering the whole of the political universe whose twin components are antithetical” (p. x). The opposition between left and right represents a typically dyadic way of thinking, for which there are examples in all fields of thought. In sociology it is society/community, in law public/private, in aesthetics classical/romantic, and in philosophy transcendent/immanent. Yet, rarely is the germaneness or current relevance of these distinctions subject to the same degree of objection as is the left/right dyad in the political sphere. In fact, a
central argument of this essay is that it is vital for democratic politics to understand that liberal democracy results from the articulation of two logics which in no way and at no time can be perfectly reconciled (Mouffe 2000, 5). As someone who writes extensively on the political theory of Wittgenstein, Chantal Mouffe articulates the irreconcilability of the left and the right in a uniquely “Wittgensteinian way”: “…there is a constitutive tension between their corresponding ‘grammars’, a tension that can never be overcome but only negotiated in different ways...The tension between its two components can only be temporarily stabilized through pragmatic negotiations between political forces which always establish the hegemony of one of them” (Mouffe 2000, 5).

The claim that the left/right distinction is exhausted has been repeated regularly throughout the years. Jean-Paul Sartre advanced this argument in the 1960s (Bobbio 1996, 3; Giddens 1998, 38), but it has been since the 1980s – accelerated of course by the collapse of communism – that we have heard so much about the demise of the left/right opposition (Mouffe 2000, 108). Bobbio identifies various reasons for the assertion that there is no longer any relevance to the distinction between left and right, an opinion which is gaining increasing currency everyday.

The first doubt Bobbio highlights arose from the so-called “crisis of ideology” which refers to those who view the distinction as having disappeared, and therefore see a certain pointlessness in attempting to contrast the concepts of left and right. The obvious objection, Bobbio argues, is that ideologies have not disappeared at all, it is merely the case that they have been replaced by others that claim to be new. Besides, there is nothing more ideological than declaring the demise or disappearance of ideologies. But then again, “left” and “right” are not just ideologies:

To reduce them to purely ideological expressions would be an unjustifiable simplification: they indicate opposing programmes in relation to many problems whose solution is part of everyday political activity. These contrasts concern not only ideas, but also interests and judgments on which direction society should be moving in; they exist in all societies, and it is not apparent how they should disappear. (Bobbio 1996, 3)

A second, and perhaps more widespread, argument is concerned with the inappropriateness of the distinction and the insufficiency of the resulting political spectrum. Basically, as Bobbio notes, the objection is that in a multi-faceted democratic society, in which many forces are at play, which agree on some points and not on others, problems cannot be posed in antithetical form as one thing or another. It follows then that the political world can no longer be divided into two distinct and opposing camps. Bobbio, however, is quite emphatic in insisting that the distinction between left and right does not in any way preclude the existence of a continuous spectrum which joins left and right. Acknowledging the existence of the “centre,” this central area between the extremes, does nothing to invalidate our thesis if we recognize that its very existence is based on the
We shall further unpack the meaning of the “centre” in our critique of “third way” philosophy.

A third reason for rejecting the oppositional dyad is the view that it has lost a great deal of its descriptive value. The left/right distinction has, in a developing society where the creation of new political problems has produced movements which cannot be categorized antithetically, become largely anachronistic. This is an argument frequently advanced by advocates of the “third way” who assert that there are many problems and issues that do not fit clearly into a left/right dimension, and feel that it is a fundamental mistake to “cram them all into it” (Giddens 2000, 39). Bobbio recognizes the nature of such movements that evade the traditional categories of left and right, yet understands that in no way does this recognition presuppose that the distinction is at all anachronistic. It is the case, Bobbio argues, that the left/right split will reproduce itself within the various movements, despite their recent appearance.

Perhaps the most decisive reason for rejecting the left/right distinction involves the claim that the two labels, “left” and “right,” have become purely fictitious. Moreover, the movements that claim to be “left-wing” and those that claim to be “right-wing,” faced with the complexity of current problems, say more or less the same things, and propose more or less the same immediate ends. Bobbio refers to politics in Italy, but this sentiment is particularly true of the political conflict in Britain, where many observers are of the opinion that there is little reason for acrimony between the two parties when the opposing sides are arguing for the same things. I shall flesh out the weaknesses in this argument below as I highlight the definitive criterion between left and right, but first, I shall attempt to qualify Bobbio’s assertion that the distinction between left and right survives.

Bobbio argues that in times when the left and the right appear evenly balanced, the question of whether the left/right distinction is relevant does not arise. But in times when either the left or the right become so powerful that it seems “the only game in town,” both sides have interests in promulgating the demise of the left/right distinction. As Margaret Thatcher proclaimed, the side that is more powerful has an interest in declaring that “there is no alternative” (Giddens 1998, 39). Furthermore, at times when one side becomes so predominant as to leave little room for the other side to be taken seriously as a political force, the weaker side has an interest in undermining the left/right distinction, and, in fact, may decide to recycle itself as something totally new, something which goes beyond the traditional distinction. This is clearly the tactic currently being employed by many parties of the left – most notably in the United Kingdom, where we find that, after eighteen years in the political wilderness, the Labour Party emerged intent on pursuing a markedly neo-liberal agenda defined by their opponents.

The fact that all of these claims to have transcended the left/right distinction fail to materialize once the parties in question move into the realm of practical politics forces one to
wonder why the distinction has proved so enduring. The most important point, according to Bobbio, is that “left” and “right” are not absolute terms. “They are not substantive or ontological concepts. They are not intrinsic qualities of the political universe,” but, rather, relative terms situated in “political space” (p. 56). What is left or right in one period is not necessarily so in another. This says nothing about the content of the opposing sides; it is only proof of their relativity. That left and right are opposites simply means that one cannot be on both the left and the right at the same time; but this says nothing about the content of the opposing sides.

The distinction has also proved enduring because politics is necessarily adversarial, and, as Bobbio explains, it should surprise no one that a dyad, or dichotomy, is the most common way of representing the political world. Bobbio refers to war, an essential dichotomy, as “the most extreme manifestation of the ‘friend/enemy’ distinction, which in turn is the most abstract way of representing politics as something antagonistic” (p. 32). War can only have two contenders. From the moment a third party becomes involved in the conflict, it becomes an ally of one side or another. For Bobbio, as long as there are conflicts, there will be polarization.

The left/right metaphor has an historical tradition, which dates back to the French Revolution (Hobsbawm 2000, 95), and although this metaphor has proved appropriate for our current orientation with the left-right spatial dyad, as Bobbio aptly points out, there is no reason to believe that history could not have come up with an alternative metaphor. “Clearly the success of left and right is due not to the felicity of the metaphor, whatever its forcefulness, but to the fundamental nature of the political distinction which it has come to express” (Bobbio 1996, x).

The Nature Of The Distinction: The Division Between Equality and Inequality, As Expressed By the Terms “Left” and “Right”

We are so accustomed to great social and economic inequalities that it is easy to become dulled to them. But if everyone else matters just as much as everyone else, it is appalling that the most effective social systems we have been able to devise permit so many people to be born into conditions of harsh deprivation which crush their prospects for a leading a decent life, while many others are well provided for from birth, come to control substantial resources, and are free to enjoy advantages vastly beyond the conditions of mere decency.

--Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*

The major criterion that continually reappears in distinguishing left from right is the ideal of equality. Bobbio, for example, sees the moral value of equality as the essential component of all leftist political theories, and, given the nature of the dyad, it follows that types of opposition to such equality are inherent characteristics of rightist political theories. As Bobbio proclaims: “…there is
a very clear distinction between the right and the left, for which the ideal of equality has always been the pole star that guides it” (Bobbio 1996, 82). The concept of equality is relative, not absolute. It is relative, Bobbio argues, to three variables which have to be considered each time the practicability of equality is discussed: “(a) the individuals between whom benefits and obligations should be shared; (b) the benefits or obligations to be shared; (c) the criteria by which they should be shared” (p. 61). In other words, no proposal for equality can fail to respond to three fundamental questions: Between whom? In what? On the basis of which criteria? One can assess the egalitarianism of a particular doctrine according to the number of persons involved, the quantity and worth of the benefits to be distributed, and the criteria used in distributing these benefits to certain groups or persons. For example, one could make the claim that orthodox social democracy, which assures all its citizens social as well as libertarian rights, is more egalitarian than liberal democracy, and certainly more egalitarian than the old-style hierarchical conservatism that believes ‘given’ differences between human beings should be directly translated into political terms: those who have the finest qualities of leadership should rule (Eagleton 1996, 119).

Before proceeding, we should recognize that only a few thinkers (Bobbio calls them egalitarianists) really believe in “equality for everyone in everything,” a regimented “sameness” across society. Such a view, according to Bobbio, would not only be a utopian vision, “…but what is worse, it would be a proposal which could not possibly have any rational meaning” (p. 63). For as Thomas Nagel, in his Equality and Partiality (1991), warns us:

A theory is utopian in the pejorative sense if it describes a form of collective life that humans, or most humans, could not lead and could not come to be able to lead through any feasible process of social and mental development. It may have value as a possibility for a few people, or as an admirable but unattainable ideal for others. But it cannot be offered as a general solution to the main question of political theory: How should we live together in society? (p. 6)

Yet, equally as important as the avoidance of utopianism is the avoidance of “hard-nosed realism” (Nagel 1991, 7). So, for Bobbio, the fact that the left is egalitarian does not mean that it is “egalitarianist.” For a doctrine or movement which tends to reduce social inequality and seeks to make natural inequalities less painful is far removed from an “egalitarianist” philosophy, understood as “equality for everyone in everything.” I hope to make this distinction clear, because it is all too often the case that those who consider equality to be the distinguishing characteristic of the left are labeled utopists, or, in the words of Bobbio, “egalitarianists.” Secondly, the fact that a certain type of egalitarian ideology has been used to justify totalitarian forms of politics has resulted in additional criticism of the left, yet, as Mouffe (2000) remarks, this “in no way forces us to relinquish the struggle for equality” (p. 123). Such criticism stems from what Bobbio calls an “insufficient understanding of the ABC of egalitarian theory” (p. 63).
It therefore follows that the left is more egalitarian than the right. Where the left feels moral outrage at the existence of social inequalities, the right sees them as rather natural and cannot understand the rage felt by the left. The root of this diametrically opposed attitude to equality, Bobbio claims, lies in the fact that human beings are both equal and unequal. The superficial assertion that “all men are equal” resembles the kind of political rhetoric with which we are familiar: the writings of Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, and innumerable declarations of rights, all contain this assertion (Minogue 1966, 52);[5] but, by adopting as a starting-point the position that all people are both equal and unequal, Bobbio recognizes the premise from which egalitarians, as well as those who are not egalitarian, operate. Thus, the distinction between those who are egalitarian and those who are not lies in their response to this claim. Bobbio, therefore, defines egalitarians as those who, “while not ignoring the fact that people are equal and unequal, believe that what they have in common has greater value in the formation of a good community. Conversely, those who are not egalitarian, while starting from the same premise, believe that their diversity has greater value in the formation of a good community” (p. 66-7). Beyond basing her beliefs on the conviction that human beings are more equal than unequal, the egalitarian is convinced that the majority of inequalities which she would like to see removed are social, and can thus be eliminated. The anti-egalitarian, on the other hand, believes the fact that we are more unequal than equal is something natural, and as such cannot be eradicated. “The contrast could not be starker: the egalitarian condemns social inequality in the name of natural equality, and the anti-egalitarian condemns social equality in the name of natural inequality” (Bobbio 1996, 68-9).[6]

Bobbio develops the theory that the distinction between left and right corresponds to the difference between egalitarianism and “inegalitarianism,” and the fundamental choice that each side arrives at with respect to what it is that makes human beings equal and what makes them unequal. Certainly Bobbio’s theory is effective in distinguishing the two ideal types, but his discourse on the ideal of equality rarely ventures outside the highly abstract. It is imperative – especially as we prepare to apply his model to New Labour – that we identify the ways in which equality, as an ideal, manifests itself in the world of practical politics.

Equality is one of the central concepts of political thought, but there are different ways of conceiving equality and wholly different reasons for advocating it (Finlayson 1999, 279). Liberals – including those who fancy themselves on the “new” or “contemporary” left – place the prime stress upon “equality of opportunity” (Giddens 2000, 86). The liberal’s conception of equality seems complex: “given” inequalities must be artificially evened up by the apparatus of the state, so that everyone has more or less the same chance as everyone else, or, put another way, “everyone must have an equal opportunity of becoming unequal” (Eagleton 1996, 116-9). Equality of opportunity creates a diversity that, for its proponents, is in no way harmful and, in fact, represents a greater value in the formation of a good community. This, Bobbio argues, is consistent with the anti-egalitarian position. The egalitarian, on the other hand, accepting the precept that human beings are not all equal in their concrete attributes, or, in the words of Locke, their “determinate
characteristics” (Hoffman 1999, 103), arrives at the conclusion that to treat two people equally must not mean giving them exactly the same treatment but attending equally to their different needs (Eagleton 1996, 116-7). An egalitarian policy is typified, Bobbio claims, by the tendency to remove the obstacles which make men and women less equal. Bobbio, in one of his few remarks on the pragmatic application of egalitarianism, refers to the principal theme of the traditional parties and movements of the left: the removal of private property. “For the left, the struggle for the abolition of private property and for collectivization has also been a struggle for equality and the removal of the main obstacle to the creation of a society of equals” (Bobbio 1996, 81). It is still the case that many define equality by the government’s ability to provide the social services and redistribution that a free market cannot ensure (Hobsbawm 2000, 105), and I would argue, in line with Bobbio, that these social services – the right to work, the right to health care, et al. – are all egalitarian services aimed at minimizing the inequalities between the haves and the have-nots. Again, Bobbio argues, there is an element that typifies the doctrines and movements which are universally recognized as left-wing, and this element is egalitarianism. At a more practical level, this egalitarianism involves encouraging policies which aim to make those who are unequal more equal, and, as Miliband (1994) avows, seeks “the elimination of the major inequalities in every sphere of life which characterize societies deeply divided on the grounds of income, wealth, power, and opportunities” (p. 54).

What unites the social democratic left is its value system of equality through social justice and social welfare based around cooperation and community with a form of government that employs collective action. The “new” social democracy and the voguish “third way” have abandoned the tests of “classic” social democracy – jobs for all, reducing inequality and increasing democratic control over the economy (Thomson 2000, 9-11). Upon recognizing the antithetical nature of the left/right distinction and the opposing attitudes to the ideal of equality that are intrinsically bound to each of the respective components that constitute the dyad, one must question how a doctrine or movement which claims to transcend the left/right distinction understands this notion of equality. I would argue that the Third Way represents a clear departure from social democracy, for included among the core values of social democracy is the firm egalitarian commitment to equality, a commitment the Third Way lacks.

**Beyond Left and Right? Questioning “Third Way” Theory**

New Labour will be a government of the radical centre….A modern party, to be successful in the modern world, must be in the centre speaking for the mainstream majority.
--Tony Blair, speaking to the British-American Chamber of Commerce in New York, 12 April 1996

Recognizing the difficulty with which one is faced when attempting to define the much-heralded “Third Way,” an article in *The Economist* (19 December 1998) comments on the third way’s “fundamental hollowness”: “Trying to pin down an exact meaning in all this is like wrestling
an inflatable man. If you get a grip on one limb, all of the hot air rushes to another” (47,49). Nevertheless, since its victory New Labour has begun to market itself as a new type of radical movement, a movement that has indeed found a third way between social democracy and neoliberalism. This third way is envisaged as occupying a position which, by being located above left and right, thereby manages to overcome their old antagonism (Mouffe 2000).

Anthony Giddens, sociologist and director of the London School of Economics, and often regarded as one of the key architects of the Third Way, attempts to theorize this model of third way politics. Socialism, argues Giddens, is dead (1998, 1). This is true not only for its communist version, but also for its traditional social democratic version whose aim was to “confront the limitations of capitalism in order to humanize it” (1998, 3). But, Giddens argues, the economic theory of social democracy was always inadequate, underestimating the capacity of capitalism to innovate and adapt (1998, 4-5). Moreover, as Giddens argues in his earlier bestseller Beyond Left and Right (1994), the “old” left’s economic theory was based on a “cybernetic model” which was reasonably effective as a means of generating economic development in conditions of “simple modernization,” but which fails to work in a post-traditional social order characterized by globalization and the expansion of “reflexive modernization” (p. 66). In today’s world, he argues, we need a new type of radical politics that responds to “life politics,” rather than the “emancipatory politics” of the left (1998; 2001, 40). This new “life” politics overcomes the traditional left/right divide by drawing on philosophic conservatism while preserving some of the core values usually associated with social democracy. This idea, of course, is consistent with his agenda of creating a “win-win politics” that goes beyond the antithetical model described by Bobbio, and promotes solutions that supposedly benefit all people in society. If our understanding of Bobbio is correct, then we can see that this is precisely where the fundamental flaw of this supposedly “new form of radicalism” lies. Overall, Giddens suggests, the Third Way can be regarded as a “contemporary” philosophy which should be prepared to forge new alliances to sustain an agenda of economic, institutional, welfare and civic reform, but, unlike the traditional centre, which lies in the middle of the spectrum of left and right, this, we are told, is a “radical centre” that goes beyond the traditional left/right division by articulating themes and values from both sides in a new synthesis (Mouffe 2000, 108; Webb 2000, 1999). Returning to Bobbio for a moment, we can see that there is in fact a qualitative difference between the “included middle” (traditional centre) and the “inclusive middle” (‘radical centre’). The “included middle,” according to Bobbio, attempts to find its space between two opposites, and although it inserts itself between them, it does not eliminate them, rather, it prevents them from coming into contact with one another, all the while providing an alternative to the stark choice between left and right (p. 7). The “inclusive middle,” on the other hand, tends to go beyond the two opposites by incorporating them into a higher synthesis, and therefore canceling them out (p. 7). The “inclusive middle,” Bobbio notes, is usually presented as an attempt at a third way, that is to say, something which transcends the politics of left and right (unlike the “included middle” which is simply in between the left and the right) (p. 8). The “included middle,” Bobbio argues, “is essentially practical politics without a doctrine, whereas the ‘inclusive middle’ is
essentially a doctrine in search of a practical politics, and as soon as this is achieved, it reveals itself as centrist” (p. 8).

The radical centrism advocated by New Labour, and various other adopters of third way philosophy, is, according to Mouffe (2000), “a renunciation of the basic tenets of radical politics” (p. 111). The central flaw of the attempt to modernize social democracy by third way theorists is, Mouffe argues, that it is based on the illusion that, by not defining an adversary, one can sidestep fundamental conflicts of interest (p. 111). This, of course, differs from “classic” social democracy which always had capitalism as one of its antagonists, and its task was to confront the systemic problems of inequality and instability generated by this mode of production. Mouffe contends that the “sacralization” of consensus, the blurring of the left/right distinction and the present urge of many left parties to locate themselves at the centre, not only created a left-wing that has abandoned any attempt to offer an alternative to the hegemonic order, but this “consensus of the centre” form of politics opens the door to populist right-wing parties (pp. 113-6). Populist parties, Mouffe argues, that challenge the dominant consensus appear to be the only anti-Establishment forces representing the will of the people. This is why discourses on the “end of politics” and the irrelevance of the left/right distinction should be cause not for celebration but for concern. Movements like New Labour, instead of trying to build a new hegemony, have capitulated to the neo-liberal one. Thus, Mouffe concludes, “one of the crucial stakes for the left democratic parties is to begin providing an alternative to neo-liberalism” (p. 118).

New Labour in Government: Politics After Thatcherism

The Blair Era

He [Blair] is, quite simply, a Liberal….This young man has not the faintest idea of how socialists think, and does not begin to understand the mentality of the party which he has been elected to lead.
--Ken Coates, a longtime Labour MEP

In his leader’s speech to the 1995 Labour Party conference, Tony Blair used the word new on fifty-nine occasions, sixteen of them with reference to “New Labour.” In contrast, he mentioned socialism just once and referred to the working class not at all (Seyd 1998, 49). By the time the Labour Party was elected to government in May 1997 it had a new constitution, new policies, new internal structures, and a brand new image. “The party had been changed out of all recognition. A revolution had occurred in British party politics more significant than anything since the Conservative Party’s postwar adaptation to social democracy” (Seyd 1998, 49-50). Unrecognizable as the party that fought the 1983 general election, the Labour Party had reinvented itself.[2] To emphasize the depth of this change, Blair officially described his party as the New Labour Party and characterized his policy orientation as the “third way.” Certainly no one denies that many of
the changes were already under way before Blair became leader, but, as Thomson (2000) points out, “the manner of their implementation has been more provocative and less consensual than in the past” (p. 131). Blair and his allies have sought, in ideological terms, to transcend some of the antinomies of recent political discourse, yet one certainly detects the prevalence of one ideological tradition over others in certain domains – conservatism in social policy, and liberalism when it comes to the international economy (Smith 2001, 254). The New Labour Party now accepts traditional social democracy as a thing of the past, principally concerned with the strengthening of capital, the agenda of New Labour reflects policies pursued by the Thatcher and Major governments.[8] As many critics of New Labour have observed, Blair’s third way politics fails, in terms of objectives as well as methods, to offer a distinctive political strategy dramatically at odds with the Thatcherite project (Heffernan 2000, 173). In fact, in 1996 Blair himself declared that Labour would fail “if it sees its task as dismantling Thatcherism” (Heffernan 2000, 19).

In sum, I would argue, New Labour is not a “third way” between the New Right and the Old Left. Claims that it has a wholly distinct agenda in economic and social policy are wrong, and given our understanding regarding the confines of the left/right distinction, these claims are absurd in that they contradict a reality that recognizes left and right as mutually exclusive totalities which cannot coexist in any sort of “dialectic totality”; rather than actively challenge the Thatcherite legacy, Labour “modernization” colludes with it. In a word, New Labour does not represent a movement that has somehow managed to transcend the left-right spatial metaphor. New Labour has simply moved to the right.

*New Labour, New Opportunism: Courting “Middle England”*

The strategy was to appeal to voters with economic and social aspirations rather than to the poor and disadvantaged. Labour would aim to represent the great majority of the public, not an assemblage of minorities.

--Patrick Seyd (1998), *Tony Blair and New Labour*

New Labour seems, for the most part, to satisfy Kirchheimer’s (1966) “catch-all” party model. Kirchheimer suggests that the affluence of the postwar period and the rise of a consumer-oriented society would force the “mass integration” parties of yesteryear to abandon attempts at the “intellectual and moral encadrement of the masses.” This catch-all “people’s” party would turn more fully to the electoral scene, “trying to exchange effectiveness in depth for a wider audience and more immediate electoral success” (p. 184). Nearly thirty years after the “catch-all” model was constructed, Tony Blair and New Labour have risen to embody the precepts of the model more clearly than anyone in recent history. Above all, Blair is concerned with identifying New Labour with the aspirations of the majority of voters, much in the same way Thatcher did in the 1980s. Labour had to become a “people’s party,” which meant embracing the middle class and prosperous
working class. Appealing to trade unions and the traditional working class was no longer sufficient, for both had shrunk dramatically in size since 1979 (Kavanagh 1997a, 536).

The essence of Labour’s victory in the 1997 general election lay in its success in “middle England.” Labour became the leading party in the massive middle-ground of the lower middle class and mortgage holders, winning almost half the vote of both groups (Harrop 1997, 313). Furthermore, during the 1997 general election net volatility reached record levels with an unprecedented proportion of voters switching directly between the major parties, as opposed to using the Liberal Democrats as a halfway house. Unlike the previous two elections, at which the Tory vote remained static, Labour’s victory this time was matched by Conservative decline; two million Conservatives appear to have switched directly to Labour (Harrop 1997, 311, Margetts 1997, 185; Norris 1997, 515) further substantiating the claim that New Labour has merely stolen the Tories political clothes. By appealing to its traditional opponents without alienating its traditional supporters, New Labour had successfully become a “catch-all party.”

Of course, New Labour’s “catch-all” status may now be fading. The most recent general election in 2001 did confirm Labour’s growing strength among the middle class, but it also exposed Labour’s unpopularity with the working class, especially among older voters living on the state pension (Harrop 2001, 308). Over the last two elections, Tony Blair’s leadership has altered class appeal, and succeeded in flattening the relationship between class and vote. The real story to emerge from the general election in 2001, however, was the decline in voter turnout. This fell from a record low of 71 per cent of the electorate in 1997 to a humbling 59 per cent in 2001 (Harrop 2001, 309). Labour was elected with fewer votes than any government since 1924. For the first time, more electors abstained from voting than voted for the winning party (Harrop 2001, 309). Did Labour’s move to the centre and its wooing of new recruits from the middle classes mean that enthusiasm was muted among the party’s traditional supporters? Despite the fact that many blame the abstention on wider social processes, I see it as a reaction to New Labour’s political decisions, its move towards the centre, its virtual abandonment of trade unions, and its active courting of the middle classes. An article in The Economist (16 February 2002) reported that just last June a mere 16 per cent of voters thought that there was a great deal of difference between Labour and the Tories. In no other election since 1964 has this proportion dipped below a third (p. 56).

Despite its many oversights, many of the propositions advanced by Anthony Downs in An Economic Theory of Democracy (1957) have materialized with the emergence of New Labour. Downs’ model is based on the assumption that every government seeks to maximize political support, and that parties seek as their final ends the power, income, and prestige that go with office. Ideologies – even ideologies that declare the “end of ideologies” – develop out of this desire as means to gaining office. Downs argues, ahead of Bobbio, that political parties “tend to maintain ideological positions that are consistent over time unless they suffer drastic defeats, in which case
they change their ideologies to resemble that of the party which defeated them” (p. 300). New Labour’s response to the dominance of Thatcherism is a notable example. The pressure in British politics is towards strategies that seek the centre – a pressure which has, of course, led New Labour to marginalize and on occasion even expel more radical elements within the party (Mair 1994, 152).

Of course, the Downsian model, which saw office-seeking as the only feature of party behavior, is limited in that it doesn’t address the fact that parties do not necessarily formulate policies to win elections but can win elections to implement policy (Heffernan 2000). The assumption that voter preferences are fixed and unchangeable has been the subject of sustained criticism. If voters do not have fixed policy preferences, parties can influence these preferences. As a result, voter preferences can be determined by party competition not simply by voters themselves (Heffernan 2000). The phenomenon of Thatcherism itself creates considerable difficulties for the Downsian model. By combining office-seeking with policy-seeking, the Thatcher-led Conservative government was able to refashion the political middle ground and pull the British political spectrum to the right (Heffernan 2000, 120), a phenomenon confirmed by Labour’s playing the politics of catch-up post-1983.

The Revision of Clause IV

Over time, Clause IV took on the status of a totem. Our agenda was misrepresented. And as statist socialism lost credibility, so did we lose support.
--Tony Blair, in Let us Face the Future (London: Fabian Society, 1995)

Blair’s first great move as party leader left no question as to which direction on the left-right spectral metaphor he intended to nudge his “new” party. An important indicator of Blair’s determination to change the nature as well as the image of the party was the rewriting of the party constitution’s Clause IV. Often dubbed the “ark of the socialist covenant,” Clause IV committed the party to public ownership, it vowed “to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service” (Seyd 1998, 55). Instead of working towards the public ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange the new clause claimed that the party would work for a dynamic economy, it welcomed the enterprise of the market, and praised the rigor of competition (Kavanagh 1997a, 536).

Again I do not wish to suggest that “modernizing” changes, especially those intent on seeing off vestiges of public ownership, were not under way before Tony Blair; nonetheless, it was Blair who made the decisive, and most symbolic, break with Labour’s past by writing out the party’s commitment to common ownership (Driver and Martell 1998, 40). For “modernizers,” this
rid the party of an irrelevant and outdated commitment inappropriate for the modern age. To Blair, this aspect of the constitution was open to misinterpretation and, what is worse, it represented the Old Labour Tradition. For the Left, it rid Labour of what made it socialist and different from other parties and replaced it with something they could all agree on (Driver and Martell 1998, 67). Thomson (2000) accuses Blair of having “miscalculated the degree to which the old Clause IV acted as a potent symbol for those on the Left, signifying the power of the state and the degree to which the Labour Party was still a socialist party. They viewed Clause IV as the ‘soul’ of the party…” (p. 132). A corollary to the replacement of Clause IV was the abandonment of plans to renationalize industries that the Conservatives had privatized. There was a time when the extension of public ownership, to the point where it would encompass most of economic activity, was, at least in theory, part of the programmatic consensus of the Left (Miliband 1994, 100). The commitment to public ownership as an ideological principle is gone, and nothing better symbolizes Labour’s willingness to embrace the market than this renouncement of public ownership.

**Taxation and the Economy**

There were certain things the 1980s got right—
an emphasis on enterprise, more flexible labour markets.  
--Tony Blair, speaking to a meeting of the Socialist International

Britain will be safe in the hands of Mr. Blair.  
--Margaret Thatcher at the start of the 1997 campaign

Traditionally, the left favors collectivist solutions to the problem of economic distribution whereas the right favors a more individualistic approach. This, of course, is no longer the case in Great Britain under the leadership of Tony Blair. One of the most important facets of New Labour’s shameless opportunism involves an obsessive desire to convince the electorate of its economic competence—a characteristic not traditionally associated with left-wing parties in Europe. Concerned only at the rhetorical level with the promotion of social justice, New Labour is principally concerned with strengthening the power of capital. Tony Blair has made it clear that excessive taxing, borrowing, and spending are all things of the past (Heffernan 2000, 71). And, in the extreme case that Labour leadership would fall victim to fits of ideological nostalgia, some luminary from the “third way” would surely be there to reel Labour back to the metaphorical middle.[12]

As we have seen thus far, New Labour has made every effort to distinguish itself from Old Labour, bringing itself ever closer ideologically to the Conservative Party. Rarely is this more evident than in their economic policy. In 1997 the prospective, now current, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, promised that the previous government’s spending plans would be retained (Margetts 1997, 182). New Labour’s willingness to keep public spending within the
targets set out by the Conservatives for at least two years after the election marked an obvious policy shift to the right that was evident in their 1997 manifesto, in which all remnants of the economic policy from the 1992 manifesto were quietly jettisoned (Sanders 1999, 182; Thorpe 2001, 229). Anything that smacked of Keynesianism was removed by Brown. Brown’s determined stance made it impossible for the Conservative Party to launch the kind of electoral onslaught on Labour that it had in 1992 (Seyd 1998, 62; Gallagher et al. 1992, 411). New Labour has clearly taken over many aspects of the Conservative economic policy, and this is confirmed throughout their manifestos. Brown’s economic strategy was predicated on the assumption that the “party was constrained by two factors: one international, globalization; the other domestic, taxpayer revolt” (Seyd 1998, 61). Faced with these pressures, Brown was more intent on controlling inflation and keeping tax rates low to improve Britain’s economic competitiveness than on expanding employment (Driver and Martell 1998, 63; Seyd 1998, 61). Unlike in years past, the Labour Party was not offering the public a radically new political economy. The Thatcherite project would remain in place. “Market individualism was the orthodoxy for Brown… not the egalitarianism of the past” (Seyd 1998, 62).

In its initial two years in government, New Labour adhered to the stringent fiscal constraints of the previous administration, led by John Major. In fact, it even underspent its allocated budgets in several ministries, achieving the lowest rate of public sector investment (0.8 per cent of GDP) for any UK administration in more than thirty years. The result: the continued deterioration of public services, most notably in the National Health Service (NHS), education, and transportation. I must note that during his July 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR), Brown, in response to the widespread criticism directed at New Labour’s failure to reinvest in the public sector, did provide a substantial increase in government spending over the next four years, and much of it was directed at the NHS and education. Although this increase in funds is certainly a welcome development, it is important to recognize that its net effect will be to restore government spending to the general level that it had reached in 1993 under the previous Conservative government (approximately 39 per cent of GDP) (Lappin 2000, 16). Tough inflation, prudent fiscal and monetary policy, low taxes and low public spending were all policies of the outgoing Tory administration and now they are the policies of Blair’s Labour (Driver and Martell 1998, 66). Labour’s transformation reflects an obvious shift in the balance of power in favor of right-reformist neo-liberal politics at the expense of left-reformist social democratic politics (Heffernan 2000, 71). New Labour looks to economic development at the expense of all other concerns, but it is now faced with the dilemma of generating the image of economic competence and making headway in delivering the goals of social justice.

Welfare and Social Policy Under New Labour

No issue has polarized left and right more profoundly in recent years than the welfare state, extolled on the one side and excoriated on the other.
New Labour’s fiscal tightening, coupled with the waning commitment to redistribution, informs moves towards a “liberal,” partially means-tested, welfare state, and away from the inclusive universalism characteristic of social democratic conceptions of welfare (Clift 2001, 65). New Labour’s reform of the welfare state is being motivated by Blair’s belief that “welfare needs of today are not being met by the welfare state of yesterday” (Annesley 2001, 206), and that the generous welfare systems traditionally put forward by social democratic parties “lock people in idleness and dependency” (Clift 2001, 65). The rhetoric is clear; New Labour has broken with the Labour tradition of seeking social justice through the tools of the welfare state. Giddens uses the term “positive welfare” to describe the Third Way approach to public-private welfare provision, promoting autonomy and individual responsibility, active health, and education, as a continuing part of life, well being and initiative (1998, 127-8). Blair and Brown have adopted the very American “welfare-to-work” program and made it their own. New Labour’s welfare reform is dominated by work-centred policies aimed at rejuvenating the work ethic. Many argue, however, that work-centred policies represent a regression from the aims of post-war welfare regimes, which sought to detach welfare from economic activity (Annesley 2001, 209-210). Others argue, as Driver and Martell (1998) note, that welfare-to-work is fine for the long term, but what about the poor on welfare now: benefit levels must be raised and paid for by higher taxes on the wealthy (p. 91).

New Labour’s approach to Great Britain’s various other social services is equally assailable. Britain’s National Health Service (NHS) is one case in point. While a member of the opposition, Labour claimed to be able to solve the problems of the NHS. Once in office, Labour found the problems less easily resolved. The biggest problem with the NHS today is the same as it was when Labour came to power in 1997: access. While the wait lists for health care have come down to a wait-time maximum of fifteen months, the next targets, which require cutting that maximum to six months by 2005 and reducing outpatient waiting to a maximum of thirteen weeks (Labour 2001, 22), will prove to be more challenging. Currently, due to the shortage of doctors and nurses, New Labour has resorted to stop-gap measures; sending patients abroad for treatment, bringing in foreign doctors and nurses, and making deals with the private sector (Grice 2002b).[13] Transportation has not fared much better. The privatized railroads have all but collapsed. On education, New Labour’s policy has been to retain the most significant elements of the Tory education reforms to the delivery of education in the 1980s.[14] New Labour, remarks Stuart Hall, seems to have interpreted the lesson of Thatcherism as: “The times are changing and Thatcherism managed for a while to hegemonize them for the right. The left should therefore model itself as closely as possible on what the right did” (Hall 1995, 26).

New Labour and the Trade Unions
We will not be held to ransom by the unions…we will stand up to strikes. We will not cave in to unrealistic pay demands from anyone…Unions have no special role in our election campaign, just as they will get no special favours in a Labour Government.

--Tony Blair, Financial Times, 7 April 1997

Marking another ideological break with the Old Left, the Blairite version of social democracy has forsaken the historical party-union bond by pursing policy aimed at distancing New Labour from the trade unions. Tony Blair made it clear that the trade unions would be consulted by a Labour government only in the same way as other groups – there would be no special favors (Seyd 1998, 62). Never mind the fact that the Labour Party was founded as the political wing of the organized working class. Upon becoming leader Blair’s advice to labor organizations in a 1994 article in the New Statesman declared that “it is in the union's best interest not to be associated with one political party” (Lipset 2001, 79). Blair argued that unions “should be able to thrive with any change of government or no change in government” – again, this from the leader of a party largely founded by trade unions and subsidized by them for all of its history (Lipset 2001, 79-80). “Modernizers” were embarrassed at the party’s financial dependence on the trade unions. The party began to cultivate the very wealthy who made substantial donations and engaged in private funding of the offices of the party leader and other frontbenchers. Between 1986 and 1996 trade union funds as a proportion of party income declined from three quarters to one half (Kavanagh 1997, 535). Blair continued his recruitment of the rich and by 1998 ordinary individual members contributed 40 per cent of party income, more than the unions for the first time. Recognizing that mass membership cannot immediately replace union funds, Blair aggressively courted Great Britain’s super-rich. And, in the same year, Labour’s High Value Donors Unit brought in 20 per cent of party income, helping to reduce the union share to 30 per cent, the lowest proportion in the history of the party (Ludlam 2001b, 117). As with so much of New Labour’s policy, the party adopted outright the legal constraints on union power introduced by the Conservatives.[15] During the 1997 campaign, the Labour Party released a special manifesto aimed at business promising that a Blair government would retain the “main elements” of Margaret Thatcher’s restrictions on trade unions (Lipset 2001, 80).

Relations between Tony Blair and the trade unions are currently at an all-time low. This in the wake of Tony Blair’s refusal to withdraw his attack on the “wreckers” – referring here to trade unionists and public service employees – who opposed Labour’s plans to reform public services through increased partnership with the private sector.[16] A recent article by George Monbiot appeared in The Guardian (19 February 2002) imploring trade unions to “disinherit” the Labour Party, claiming that the party they had created had disowned them. “They must,” Monbiot declares, “destroy the system which guarantees that power remains the preserve of the parties of big business” (p.3). It is apparent that New Labour will not repeal anti-union laws, nor even promise full employment. Unions no longer have a role in determining party industrial relations policy, and
the authority of the industrial sector is no longer recognized by party elites. So, Ludlam (2001b) claims, “whether in a front-page divorce settlement, pressed by modernizers, or a longer process of mutual disengagement, the 100 year-old labour alliance, in its historic, constitutionally united form, is unlikely to last long into its second century” (p. 128-9).

Conclusion

According to a recent article in The Guardian (19 February 2002), after meeting with Tony Blair early in February, Silvio Berlusconi – Italy’s controversial right-wing Prime Minister – told the press that the two men “see eye to eye.” Blair added: “Some of those old distinctions – left and right – are no longer in my view as relevant as they were maybe thirty, forty years ago” (Monbiot 2002, 1). Labour’s shift away from old social democratic means and ends has been accompanied, as I have tried to demonstrate throughout, by a shift to a greater neo-liberalism and conservatism in its economic and social policy. In its economics, New Labour has abandoned the notion of collectivism and now, as Driver and Martell (1998) point out, “the market economy more than the mixed economy is now seen as the basis of economic success” (p. 164). New Labour’s social policy has become linked with the success of British capitalism. Labour increasingly envisages that health, education and social security should be provided differently by diverse agencies rather than commonly by the state (Driver and Martell 1998, 165). There is little doubt that the Thatcherite inheritance has influenced New Labour, and for those who expected Blair to return to a recognizable version of Labour’s classic agenda after his convincing electoral victory must be surprised to find that Blair & Gang’s re-tooling of the party was not a short-term election tactic. New Labour has exhibited a remarkable degree of continuity with its Conservative predecessors in its first five years in government. There, too, is a qualitative break with Old Labour on the question of equality. Where Old Labour’s version of equality was “designed to equalize life chances directly through taxation and services, and to support those who could not support themselves,” New Labour has confined equality to “giving individuals equal chances to make use of the opportunities provided for them” (Thomson 2000, 150). Blair seems persuaded that the question of equality is no longer on the political agenda, and when it does happen to surface, New Labour reduces to its less radical, and fundamentally liberal interpretation, as equality of opportunity.

Ralph Miliband (1994), in his posthumous book entitled Socialism for a Sceptical Age, maintains that the future of the Left hinges on the question of whether there is any prospect that these parties might move towards more radical positions. I would answer, based on the evidence gathered here, that the temptation is to answer with a resounding negative, and, as is visible by the direction of New Labour, any expectation of social democratic parties being more than, at best, parties of mild reform is specter. This, of course, is a far cry from declaring that the left has been defeated or is anyway obsolete, and that there is no real choice for the electorate. For that is an argument advanced by those who assert that the left/right distinction is no longer relevant. I, like Bobbio, recognize that the political universe has forever been defined by the struggle between left
and right, despite the vapid rhetoric of the third way and parties like New Labour who try to sidestep this antagonism with the rhetorical dismissal of the left/right distinction, politics will remain an arena marked by struggle, and all parties situated in the political universe from here to come will continue to be sorted along the enduring left-right spectrum.

REFERENCES


[2] As further explanation of the centre’s dependence on the existence of the left/right spatial dyad, Bobbio draws an analogy from nature. Day and night are divided by dusk, yet, Bobbio remarks, dusk takes nothing away from the distinction between day and night. Moreover, the duration of dusk varies according to the season and the latitude, but its duration in no way affects the fact that its definition depends on the definition of day and night (p. 5-6).

[3] It originated in 18th Century France when Louis XVI convened the Etats Generaux. The members of the first and second estates, the aristocracy and the church, elected to sit to the right of the presiding chair; the representatives of the ‘people’ – in reality, the middle classes, or third estate – took their places on the left (Sassoon 1996, xxi).

[4] This passage was taken from the introduction of this text, written by Allan Cameron.

[5] This, of course, is not to suggest that the three aforementioned thinkers did not advance independent theories on the origins of inequality, or even that they in any way disagree with Bobbio. I use these particular philosophers insofar as – for all three thinkers – man’s social condition is built on the foundation of natural equality (Hoffman 1999, 271).

[6] Bobbio demonstrates the distinction between the different evaluations of natural and social equalities by referring to the egalitarian ideal and the anti-egalitarian ideal: Rousseau and the “anti-Rousseau,” Nietzsche. “Rousseau argues from the premise that all men are born equal but are made unequal by civil society, that it is the society which slowly imposes itself on the state of nature through the development of the division of labour. Conversely, Nietzsche works on the premise that men are by nature born unequal…and that only a society with a herd morality and a religion based on compassion and submissiveness could make them equal. The same degeneration which created inequality for Rousseau created equality for Nietzsche” (Bobbio 1996, 68).

[7] The 1983 general election witnessed the Labour Party position itself well to the left of the majority of the electorate on some of the major issues, particularly nationalization, nuclear disarmament, and law and order (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 2001, 85-8). Viewed by many as ‘too extreme’, Labour slumped to their lowest share of the vote (27.6 per cent) since 1918 (Ludlam 2001, 8). The Labour Party, as we will see, has steadily moved since 1983 to compete on ground defined by its opponents (Kavanagh 1994, 601).

[8] Nowhere is this shift in Labour ideology more apparent than in Labour’s 1997 Manifesto which, marking an obvious policy shift to the right, echoes the economic priorities outlined in the 1979 Conservative Manifesto (Sanders 1999, 182).
The relationship with New Labour and pensioners has not improved; British pensioners are currently in trouble. New Labour’s belief that the problems of ageing Britains could be privatized has proved a failure. In an attempt to rescue from desperation those they placed there, Ed Balls, the chancellor’s chief economic advisor, is now, according to The Guardian (20 March 2002), prepared to raise taxes to pay for social spending, as well as slant pension provisions toward the less well off.

Certainly I take into account the consequences of post-materialism on class saliency, as well as the empirical evidence suggesting the decline in the working class, but I would tend to agree with the argument put forward by Przeworski and Sprague (1986) which claims that “…class is salient in any society, if, when, and only to the extent to which it is important to political parties which mobilize workers…when no political forces seek to mobilize workers as a class, separately from and in opposition to all other classes, class is absent altogether as a principle of political organization” (p. 10-11). Labour leadership ignored the dynamic potential of the working class, choosing instead to abandon its core in search of the middle-class vote.

The changes in electoral participation were specific to Labour and were not part of a general trend towards civic disengagement or political cynicism. In a word, the decline in voter turnout was greater among traditional Labour voters than it was among other groups. For aggregate data on the subject see Heath et al. (2001).

See Anthony Giddens’ article in the Independent (07 January 2002), entitled, “Don’t go back to the bad old ways of tax and spend, Mr. Blair.” Giddens argues that New Labour was right to break away from the equation that higher tax rates equal better public services and more social justice, and he warns the party “not to slip back into the old ways of thinking. Taxation affects economic performance and cannot be tucked away under the social justice label as though it had no implications for economic activity.”

Many object to the partial privatization of NHS, claiming that New Labour has betrayed its promises and is setting a course to dismantle the very foundation of the National Health Service (Socialist Worker, May 2001, p. 2). The 2001 Labour manifesto advocates the creation of a “new type of hospital…managed by the NHS or the private sector…” This in stark contrast to Labour’s 1997 manifesto which claimed to be “opposed to the privatization of clinical services which is actively being promoted by the Conservatives.”

Only in respect to the ‘assisted places scheme’, first introduced in 1980 to pay for bright children from poor families to attend independent fee-paying schools, did the Labour Party reverse the Conservative policy on the grounds of equity (Driver and Martell 1998, 99).

The Tory restrictions on the unions included general legislation aimed at hindering worker mobilization – strike ballots, union elections, and picketing (Driver and Martell 1998, 69).