**Labour Party**

The Labour Party has historically been held to be a socialist party. Though there are many definitions of socialism a basic characteristic of it is that it is concerned with the pursuit of equality. There are perhaps 3 basic dimensions: social equality, political equality and economic equality.

**Social Equality**

This is the idea that all people are of equal worth regardless of social class, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or disability. In office Labour has legislated against forms of discrimination, in the Sex Discrimination Act (1975), the Race Relations Act (1976), The Disability Discrimination Act (1996) and the Equality Act (2010). Prejudice (an attitude) is of course much harder to tackle than discrimination (a behaviour).

**Political Equality**

The idea is that all persons should have equal access to political rights such as the vote and the right to stand as a candidate.

**Economic Equality**

Economic equality is of course very difficult to achieve. In fact it is so difficult that it is not truly an aim of the Labour Party. Instead, equality of opportunity, as opposed to equality of outcome, is the stated aim of the Labour party. Given wide ranging social class divisions even equality of opportunity is very difficult to achieve.

The degree to which the Labour Party has been ‘committed’ to socialism has often been called into question. An examination of how socialist the Labour Party is needs to take into account its record in office as well as changes in its commitments and policies when in opposition. It has been particularly difficult to conceive of Labour Party as a socialist party, given the emphasis on ‘New Labour’ by Tony Blair and other leading figures in the party. However the election first of Ed Miliband as leader (2010-2015) and now Jeremy Corbyn has seen the Labour Party shift progressively leftwards.

**The Labour Party: a brief history**

In 1900 the Labour Representation Committee was formed to secure seats in parliament for representatives of the trade union movement and the industrial working class.

In 1906, at the General Election, 29 seats were obtained by the LRC and the parliamentary Labour party was officially formed.

In 1918 Sydney and Beatrice Webb drafted a constitution for the Labour Party. The key feature of the constitution was Clause 4, part four, which stated the aims of the party:

“To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and for 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”.

This clause has historically been referred to as the ‘nationalisation clause’

In 1945 Labour obtained a landslide majority of 146 in Parliament. Set against the context of the war, and of the hardships of the depression ridden 1930s, the Attlee government pledged to build ‘A ‘New Jerusalem’. In 1942 the Beveridge Report had identified 5 Giant Ills, which had stalked the 1930s: Poverty, Ignorance, Disease, Squalor and Want. The Welfare state, designed to care for citizens ’from the cradle to the grave’ was introduced. The key planks of the post war consensus were laid in the first term of the Attlee government:

• The Implementation of the 1944 White Paper on Employment – Full Employment

• The Implementation of the 1944 Butler Education Act: Free Compulsory Education to the age of 15

• The Nationalisation of the ‘Commanding heights’ of the economy: Clause Four

• The Creation of the Welfare state – a system of pensions, disability and unemployment benefits, based on national insurance contributions

• The Creation of the NHS in 1948 – free health care at the point of delivery.

These reforms laid the planks of the post war consensus, observed by both Conservative and Labour Governments until the mid 1970’s when the post war consensus collapsed and both parties moved away from the centre.

On taking office in 1997, Tony Blair said: “We were elected as new Labour and we will govern as new labour”. The concept of New Labour predates Blair’s leadership election in 1994. In fact, New Labour has its antecedents as far back as June 9th 1983. The election of Neil Kinnock in Oct 1983 marked the beginning of an extraordinary shift not only in the Labour Party’s ideological positioning, but also in its internal structure and organisation.

The political theorist Maurice Duverger (Political Parties 1959) argued that political parties experiencing defeat often engaged in a process of what he called “structural tinkering”. The theory is that, having lost an election, the party needs to change the internal balance of power, in order to ideologically reposition itself. The birth and development of New Labour is a case in point.

Under Neil Kinnock’s leadership, a series of internal reforms was initiated, designed to reduce the power of the left and the power of the trade unions. This reorganisation was also an attempt to relate to the electorate that Labour was changing, and that factors which made it unpopular, such as the dominance of the unions over the party, and the infiltration of the Party by members of the Trotskyist Militant Tendency, were being addressed.

In 1987, Labour ran a good campaign, but lost the election. A slightly improved performance appeared to vindicate the reforms thus far implemented. In the aftermath of the 1987 defeat, Labour launched a policy review, had already replaced the red flag (reminiscent of the Eastern European state socialism) with the red rose, emblematic of Western European social democracy. It was a visual cue to the electorate, symbolic of Labour’s distancing itself from hard left policies.

The policy review and the subsequent “Labour Listens” campaign, constituted further evidence of Labour attempting to persuade the electorate that it had changed. One negative perception of such initiatives was that Labour was unprincipled and would do and say anything to obtain office. Although Labour ran the Conservatives close in 1992, it lost its fourth general election in a row.

The death of John Smith in May 1994 gave the architects of New Labour, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson, the opportunity to seize the party leadership and accelerate the transition from Old Labour to New Labour. Symbolic of Old Labour was Clause 4, Part 4 of the 1918 constitution, the so-called “Nationalisation Clause”. Tony Blair, in 1995, managed to persuade the party to ditch Clause 4 in favour of a new statement of values. John Prescott, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party called the new statement “traditional values in a modern setting”.

**The New Clause Four**

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

New Labour embraced the private sector in a way that Old Labour could never have done, and many of its policies were more radical than even the Conservatives could have contemplated, including the privatisation of air traffic control, privatisation of the Tube network, cuts in single parent benefits and the introduction of tuition top-up fees.

Tony Blair called the accusation that New Labour was just the same as the Conservatives, a lie. He pointed to the windfall tax on the privatised utilities, which created 1.5m jobs for the New Deal, which virtually eradicated youth unemployment. He pointed also to the constitutional reforms which the Conservatives have opposed every step of the way and he also introduced the national minimum wage and signed up for the social chapter of the Maastricht Treaty, which gives millions of part-time workers rights and benefits they previously did not enjoy.

Every Labour government since the war has dazzled and then disappointed especially on economic policy. The outstanding achievement of New Labour was to steer the economy clear of recession for 43 successive quarters and make Labour the electorate’s preference over the Tories for economic management, until the financial crisis of 2008 ripped that reputation and hard won confidence to shreds. Despite attempts to label the crisis as a global one (this worked for the Conservatives in 1991) the electorate never really warmed to Brown and Labour lost the 2010 General Election.

**Old Labour Policies and Image**

• Nationalisation

• income tax rises for the well-off

• social spending

• no private engagement in the public sector

• party control over the manifesto

• strong links with unions

• reputation for economic mismanagement and inflation

• a reputation for extremism

**New Labour Policies and Image**

• A reputation for strong economic management

• public-private partnerships (PFI = private finance initiative in public services)

• national minimum wage and the New Deal

• tuition top-up fees

• cuts in disability and single-parent benefits

• constitutional reform

• moderate public image

The 2010 defeat resulted in the election of Ed Miliband as leader of the Labour party. Under his leadership the rather artificial divide in the party between the Blairites and the Brownites gave way to various factions such as Blue Labour, Black Labour, Red Labour and Purple Labour each with different positions on how the party could best respond to the 2010 defeat. Miliband sought to aggregate the various positions of these factions into an electorally successful “coalition” within (and hopefully beyond) the Labour Party but was unable to convince the electorate. In 2010Labour suffered their worst result since 1983 (209 seats), with 232 seats in 2015.

Following this defeat and with a massive influx of new supporters and members the party overwhelmingly elected Jeremy Corbyn as leader in September 2015. Since then Corbyn has steered the party towards a much more traditionally socialist platform than at any time in Labour’s recent history. To this day the truism that Labour cannot win an election from the left seems to be borne out in the opinion polls, but then the polls indicated a hung parliament in 2015, a remain victory in the 2016 Brexit referendum and a Clinton presidential victory in November 2016. Interesting times.