

## **New Labour: Culture and Economy**

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Under Tony Blair, New Labour modernisers have made much of the moral rather than economic arguments for socialism. Values like community and responsibility, they argue, are what really defines socialism or the centre-left, not technical means or instruments such as public ownership, tax-and-spend or state welfare (see, for example, Blair, 1995c; Wright, 1997). New Labour has defined itself in ethical terms. In matters concerning human behaviour, whether in parenting or in the classroom, on welfare or on the streets, New Labour has set out a communitarian moral agenda about duties in the community and the rights and responsibilities of individuals. Both Thatcherite 'get what you can' individualism and rights-claiming social democracy, it is argued, left a moral vacuum in society which needs to be filled (Blair, 1995a). But does New Labour's moralism amount to a 'cultural turn'? Or to put it another way, is New Labour an instance of the culturalisation of politics?

### **Culturalisation theses**

There is no single culturalisation thesis. Among the issues discussed in this book are a variety of theses about the culturalisation of society and politics. We do not wish to dwell on these as they are outlined more fully in the introduction and other chapters of this volume. But five culturalisation theses can be identified which seem most relevant to politics and to changes in the ideas and policies of the British Labour Party.

One thesis is that there has been a shift in interest, among political agents, from inequality to difference; from the political economy of resource distribution to the politics of identity and cultural recognition. Political actors are less concerned with economic inequality and more with cultural difference as a positive value. The economic dimensions of inequality have become less focused on, relative to cultural considerations, and difference has shifted from being a problem to something of value (see, for example, Fraser, 1995).

A second thesis is that there has been a shift from economic to cultural explanations of the economy. The economy is not just a matter of economic instruments and technical processes. It is increasingly seen to be significantly marked by cultural and moral underpinnings. Different forms of economy have different cultural bases which affect their shape and success. Analyses of

economic difference and success focus less and less on technical economic processes and more on cultural differences.<sup>1</sup>

A third thesis is that politics is decreasingly concerned with economics and more with moral concerns. Political actors perceive that they have a decreasing amount of control over the economy, largely because of processes such as globalisation. Therefore they attempt instead to pursue changes in culture or morality. Or they perceive that we live in a post-material world where people with higher standards of living than in the past are more concerned with moral than economic issues. Politicians are more interested in moral or missionary government than economic intervention (Demos, 1995).

A fourth thesis is that there is a shift away from critiques of commodification and consumerism to their celebration. Consumption on the market is seen as a source of fulfilment rather than alienation. This goes hand in hand with a shift from economic to cultural emphases: analyses from a culturalist perspective see as positive for the consumer what analyses from economic perspectives saw as problematic for the producer (Ray and Sayer: this volume).

A fifth thesis is that politics has become increasingly culturalised not only in content but also in style. The stylisation of politics and the importance of its form have reached new heights in the hands of spindoctors and media manipulators (Jones 1995 and 1997). The mediatization of politics and aesthetic considerations have become so important as to displace substance from politics.

### **New Labour and the Cultural Turn**

At first glance, New Labour seems to fit these culturalisation theses quite well. There has been a shift away from ideas of equality as economic redistribution towards equality of opportunity and individual potential in New Labour ideas and policies. Labour's political economy is concerned with the cultural bases of capitalist success: there has been much debate on the centre-left about the contribution of cultures in other countries to their economic success and about the extent to which elements from successful cultures of capitalism can be learnt from in Britain. Labour have explicitly argued that globalisation ties their hands economically. Moral exhortation, guidance and legislation have been big parts of its agenda, on parenting, teaching methods and welfare, alcohol, smoking and hunting, to mention just a few. Some of the first signs of turbulence to hit Blair's Labour government were accusations of bossiness and over-zealous moralism. Labour modernisers have also switched concern from producer to consumer interests. And much has been made of the meticulous care, co-ordination and manipulation that has gone into the presentation of Labour's image to the public. Spindoctoring, it is thought, has

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Hutton (1995) and Albert (1993)'s discussions of different models of capitalism, based to a significant extent on the different cultural configurations underlying those models. Also Harrison (1992).

been taken to new heights by the media managers of the modern Labour Party. In all these respects New Labour would seem to be prime candidates for support for the thesis that politics has been culturalised.

But what is New Labour all about? What do its economics and social policy amount to? What is the communitarianism Blair espouses which would seem to be central to Labour's moralism?<sup>2</sup> Do Labour's economics, social policy and communitarianism show an example of a 'cultural turn' in contemporary politics?

### **New Labour, New Times: economy, welfare and social justice**

Labour's changing ideas and policies are based on the idea that we live in 'new times'. New times had become a familiar analytical device, as well as slogan, in *Marxism Today* in the 1980s. Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall (1989, p11) suggested that: 'The world has changed, not just incrementally but qualitatively.' For many on the left, new times brought together ideas about how modern (and to some, *post*-modern) societies were being transformed by new economic, social and cultural forces like post-Fordism and globalisation; how the old class structures and political allegiances were disappearing; how society had become less bound by tradition, deference and patriarchal relationships; how civil society had become more differentiated, pluralistic and individualistic; and how the individual subject was becoming reflexive and fragmented in terms of its identity. In the economy, new times meant mass production giving way to flexible specialisation; in society, they had led to the fragmentation of social relations and cultural identities. Where for much of the 20th century, society had been marked by social uniformity and the unified subject, new times were bringing about a social diversification and the 'de-centred' subject.

For Jacques and Hall, the political consequences of new times was that the Left must move with them and find a politics 'beyond Thatcherism'. For the Labour Party, this meant shedding its 'Labourist' trade union roots and embracing the more culturally inflected politics of the new social movements (see also Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Tony Blair shares this 'post-Thatcherite' reading of contemporary politics. Or at least, he shares a *version* of it, one which focuses on the political economy of late 20th century market economies. As a response to new times, New Labour has embraced the flexibility (and efficiency) of the market; but leading Labour modernisers like Blair and Jack Straw are far less comfortable with the social fragmentation that new times has brought, seeing it less as a basis for new political alliances and more as a problem of social order.

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller analysis of New Labour see Driver and Martell (1998). We shall focus on Labour's economics, social policy and communitarianism in this chapter. For reasons of time and space and because it is less directly relevant to the culture and economy issues we are dealing with here we shall leave aside Labour's approach to political and constitutional reform - these are dealt with in our book mentioned above.

On the economy and welfare state, Labour modernisers have made it clear that there is no going back to the political economy of state socialism or social democracy. The free market reforms of Thatcherism, in particular privatisation and the deregulation of the labour market, are to be retained. Blair has carried the radical moderniser message that the reforms of eighteen years of Conservative government are not to be undone by the new Labour government. Indeed, in the case of the welfare state, it is Labour not the Conservatives who are now making the case for radical reform involving a considerable extension of the principle of individual responsibility. The rewriting by Blair of the old Clause Four, which committed the party to common ownership of property, was symbolic of New Labour's break with the past. The appropriateness of public and private is now seen by Labour as a matter of practical rather than ideological concern (Blair, 1997). Furthermore, Labour modernisers have shifted away from a concern with producer interests to those of the consumer. Blair has explicitly said that a Labour government will not be dictated to by producer interests; and that trade unions can assume 'fairness but not favours' (Blair, 1994a). In opposition, Labour developed plans to tighten up on the regulation of financial services and the privatised utilities; and to toughen competition policy, all, at least in part, in the interests of giving consumers a better deal. The education and health reforms of the new Labour government are in large part about delivering better standards to the users of these services: 'producers' such as teachers and health workers can expect a harder ride in the push to drive out incompetence, inefficiency or waste in the interests of pupils and patients.

This 'post-Thatcherite' strategy, Blair argues, is necessary because new times require new means for achieving old socialist values (Blair, 1995c). Globalisation, for example, is perceived to have undermined national Keynesian strategies of demand management: capital is internationally mobile and demand cannot be manipulated by national governments to create full employment. Rather, governments have a more limited role in helping to create the stable low inflation macro-economic conditions and skilled labour markets which attract capital investment and bring job opportunities (Brown, 1994). New economic times for New Labour are also post-industrial in character. Labour modernisers have made great play of the importance of information and communication technologies and the cultural industries to advanced market economies. These sectors have been singled out by Labour as worthy of special promotion: for example, Labour's attempt to pursue public-private partnerships to network schools; and Blair's courting of entertainers and designers. New Labour has embraced the idea that the shift from fordism to post-fordism has brought with it a far greater need for flexibility on the part of companies to adapt to global markets and rapid technological change. Similarly workers have to be flexible to take on new skills and face greater insecurities in the labour market.

Social policy in such conditions is conceived less as a means to redistribute incomes and wealth, or to act as a band-aid for capitalism, and rather as a means of increasing individual opportunities by creating labour market flexibility in a global economy *and* expanding the non-inflationary growth rate

of the British economy. In New Labour-speak, welfare should offer 'a hand-up, not a hand-out'. Governments should help individuals get on in an uncertain world, not lock them into dependency and social exclusion. In terms of delivery, New Labour reject what they perceive was the statist approach of postwar social democracy. Labour modernisers advocate the devolution of responsibilities from the state to a variety of agencies: individual self-help or the private sector, for example, as in private pensions, university education and health. Devolution of powers, to schools and GPs for instance, is to be maintained and to some extent modified, not reversed. Welfare and educational rights are seen as requiring greater responsibilities in return: responsibilities of parents on attendance, punctuality and homework for example, and of welfare recipients to take up jobs and join welfare-to-work schemes. Much of this breaks with the universal and comprehensive ideas of uniform state welfare and with pre-Blair social democracy's emphasis on rights to education and welfare (Blair, 1995b; 1996c; Labour Party, 1995a and b; 1996a and b).

Labour's post-Thatcherite - and post-communist - political economy has relied in part on the 'models of capitalism' debates. In this literature (see, for example, Albert 1993; Hutton 1995) it is perceived that the major global conflicts are no longer political, between capitalism and socialism: capitalism has won that battle. Now global competition is economic, between different forms of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes the different forms of capitalism are, among other things, their different cultural bases. Japanese and German capitalisms, for example, while very different from each other, are seen to share interventionist and collaborative institutional networks and cultures. Relationships are less market-based and more long term. Britain and the USA are more individualistic and laissez-faire, with relationships conducted more through the market, at arms length and with shorter term objectives.

In Singapore in 1996, Blair advocated greater stakeholding in corporate affairs: making companies more accountable to a greater variety of stakeholders than just shareholders. This, many believed, would lead to a more long-term constructive engagement in companies rather than short term, dividend-oriented, arms-length relations (Blair, 1996a; see also Kelly et al 1997). Subsequently, such a corporate model of stakeholding has been eclipsed in New Labour thinking by an individual version of stakeholding. This sees society (not specifically the corporation) as an entity in which all individuals should have a stake. Certain groups, the young and long term unemployed, single parents and people locked into welfare dependency are, it is said, currently excluded from society and from the opportunities others have. They need to be brought back into society and given a stake in it through job opportunities. Hence the welfare-to-work programme, the Social Exclusion Unit, the minimum wage and the ambition to reform the tax and benefit system to provide incentives for the unemployed to take paid work.

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<sup>3</sup> Although other commentators suggest they are between religious fundamentalism and liberalism, or North and South, among other possibilities.

New Labour's embrace of the market economy and of welfare reform forms the basis for a new policy consensus with the Conservatives in Britain. There are, to be sure, differences. The new Labour government is more activist in the labour market: on welfare-to-work, the minimum wage and the Social Chapter. But on the broad sweep of fiscal and monetary policy, as well as the principles of welfare reform - namely, greater individual responsibility to match welfare rights - New Labour has moved onto the political and policy territory mapped out by the Conservatives in the 1980s. Indeed, in opposition, it was Labour's claim that it, not the Tories, had the competence in government to deliver stable, low-inflationary growth and welfare reform, among other things.

Where does all this leave Labour's idea of social justice? Despite the financing of the welfare-to-work programme (from a 'windfall tax' on the privatised utilities), the new Labour government came to power with a commitment to not raising income tax levels and to sticking with the previous Tory government's public spending plans. This may in part have been a shrewd political move to avoid damaging accusations that New Labour was the devil in disguise - and that a Labour government would revert to old Labour habits of tax-and-spend. But this is to underestimate the scale of the Blair revolution in the Labour party. The Commission on Social Justice (1994) paved the way for Labour modernisers in the 1990s to explicitly reject redistributive economic and social policies as the basis for social justice. Social justice for New Labour is now about greater equality of opportunity: it is about 'social inclusion' and 'fairness' (in terms of tax rates, for example). Gordon Brown, for one, is on record arguing that Labour's key aim is greater equality of opportunity in a lifelong sense rather than more equal outcomes (Brown 1994, 1997a, 1997b.). There is certainly a redistributive element to the windfall tax; but the egalitarian effects of welfare-to-work are likely to be minor if there are any at all.

### **Economic and social policy: the culturalisation thesis considered**

So where do these shifts in economics, social policy and social justice leave us in relation to the culturalisation theses? On the surface the policy changes under Blair seem to lend some support to the idea that politics, at least in the case of the Labour Party, has become more cultural in the terms of the theses we set out above. These are: first, that there has been a shift away from economic and social egalitarianism to ideas of equality of individual opportunity and social inclusion; secondly, observations about the cultural bases of different forms of capitalism have fed into New Labour's economic reforms; and thirdly, New Labour has embraced the market economy, distanced itself from producer interests and thrown its lot behind the consumer. In all these three areas, however, we wish to argue that these shifts in ideology and policy are not as much instances of culturalisation as they may at first appear to be.

First, the shift away from egalitarianism is more about opportunities than difference; and as much about a shift away from socialist to a narrower liberal conception of equality as it is a cultural turn. New Labour's emphasis on

individual opportunity and the fulfilment of individual potential is not especially linked to a celebration of difference. Insofar as individuals are seen as important, New Labour focus on their *opportunities* to participate in society, in particular, access to the labour market. This is not the same as emphasising their *difference*; and it certainly does not amount to a celebration of cultural diversity or the fragmentation of cultural identity thought to be a central feature of contemporary culture and society. Having equal opportunities could lead to the pursuit of activities which are different, or individuals could conform with social mores: difference is not really the point here. Similarly, where Labour modernisers emphasise the importance of individuals fulfilling their potential, the emphasis is on individuals fulfilling what they are capable of, whether this involves conformity to general norms or greater difference. If anything, Labour are much more concerned with individuals fulfilling duties and obligations to society and individuals sharing in common values and moral norms. Indeed, social fragmentation is seen as undermining individual opportunity.

There is little distinctively *cultural* about New Labour's shift away from egalitarian notions of social justice to one focused on individual opportunity. The distinctive feature of New Labour is less the valuing of cultural diversity and more a straightforward move from left rightwards in terms of political economy; from the left's traditional concern with redistributive justice to the right's concern with just deserts. Indeed, Labour modernisers justify the shift from egalitarianism to equality of opportunity on the basis that inequality is needed to provide incentives, and is often deserved and desirable, and that redistributive equality is unattainable because of limits on increases in income taxation. Moreover equal opportunities are conceptualised in a very economic way. For New Labour it is mainly about individuals gaining a stake in society through employment. A great deal rests, in Labour's one-nation stakeholding, on *economic* inclusion.<sup>4</sup> In this way, New Labour's 'new times' are fundamentally economic in character, concerned less with cultural diversity and more with economic flexibility. Where New Labour does address the nature of contemporary cultural identity, as we shall see shortly, there is a concern that social fragmentation is undermining social cohesion.

Secondly, New Labour's economics may be culturally conscious; but the central feature of the new Labour government's economic policy is the rejection of the political economies of state socialism (in particular, state ownership and planning) and social democracy (in particular, Keynesian demand management) in favour of liberal free markets and anti-inflationary fiscal and monetary policies. On closer inspection, New Labour's economics are best understood in terms of a left-right shift as much as in terms of an economic-cultural one. Despite the interest shown by Labour modernisers in foreign models of capitalism, it is this shift from one set of economic models to another set (in large part, models which break on left-right lines) which

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<sup>4</sup> Ruth Levitas (1996) argues in relation to other proposals for inclusion - from Will Hutton, the EU and the Social Justice Commission (a forerunner to Labour's proposals) - that such approaches are *too* economically focused on employment and labour market participation.

defines New Labour. The focus of the new Labour government's economic policies is quite traditional, concerned with the regulation of the labour market, levels of taxation and public expenditure and interest rates; there is little interest in the cultural bases of economic life; and certainly little interest in doing anything about the culture of British capitalism in the manner advocated by Will Hutton or David Marquand (see Hutton, 1995; Marquand, 1988). Indeed, Labour modernisers may find attractive different features of capitalisms the world over - and under Blair, New Labour have found the Anglo-Saxon model, with its flexible Labour markets, far more attractive than the more heavily regulated Continental model - but they have also been keen to impress that cultures of capitalism cannot be transplanted onto British soil; that Britain has its own cultural traditions which a Labour government has to work within; and that economic policy should be based on the indigenous culture (Blair, 1995b; Darling, 1997). Such a view certainly demonstrates a sensitivity to culture, but it is accommodating rather than transformatory; or at least it is in the case of Britain: Blair and Brown are prone to lecture Continental European policy-makers that they should adopt the British model of flexible labour markets to reduce dole queues - and so, by implication, to work against their own cultural heritage. Furthermore, Labour modernisers' penchant for design, information technologies and the cultural industries - 'cool Britannia' - hardly amounts to a cultural turn by Labour's leaders. Conran, computers and Britpop certainly help *New Labour* to project an image of *New Britain*; but it is their perceived contribution to economic growth and to British exports which lie at the root of Labour's love of culture.

Thirdly, New Labour's shift away from producer to consumer interests does not amount to a celebration of the culture of consumption: 'I shop therefore I am' is unlikely to make it into any Blair speech! Indeed, there is a certain unease among Labour modernisers with the idea that meaning and value in modern society are based on individual choice in the market place. On family policy, for example, Labour modernisers single out the 'terrible price for the application of choice-based individualism to the business of being a parent' (Wright, 1997, p109). On the specific question of the consumer, New Labour is more concerned whether consumers get a fair deal - and that public service providers, especially local government, put consumer interests first - than with the cultural joys of consumption. And there is of course the political imperative for New Labour to distance themselves from links with the trade union producer groups which helped both to define and to sustain Old Labour. Labour is certainly concerned that consumers should have adequate rights and choices, whether as parents or patients in education and health, or as users of financial services, for example. But this is a reaction against the disempowerment of users under paternalistic Old Labour and free market Thatcherism. It is as much about the poor treatment of consumers in the past at the hands of a distant state or narrow-mindedly profiteering businesses than any positive celebration of consumerism. And as we shall turn to now, much of Labour's communitarianism involves a critique of the 'I, me, mine' economic egoism of Thatcherism, which Labour modernisers argue has destroyed the moral bonds of society (Blair, 1995a).

## Labour's communitarianisms and the cultural turn

If there are fewer signs of a cultural turn in Labour's economic and social policies than there might at first sight appear to be, is there anything in its communitarianism which might support a culturalisation thesis?<sup>5</sup> It is certainly true that New Labour, with one eye on the traditionally Tory voters of middle England, and in part also driven by a genuine ethical zeal, is keen to emphasise moral values. New Labour's communitarian arguments are at one and the same time a political response to the Conservative Party's grip on power - and the need to reform Labour to effectively challenge that grip - *and* a cultural critique of modern society - its values and institutions.

Labour's communitarianism operates at three levels<sup>6</sup>. At a *sociological* level communitarianism offers Labour a retort to the neo-liberal view that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families. For Blair individuals do not become what they are outside of the community of which they are members. They are constituted through the social relations they are embedded in. At an *ethical* level, Labour is communitarian because it believes community is a good thing. New Labour offers community as better than a society in which everyone runs around pursuing their own self-interest or simply claiming rights. Politically, Labour argues that the community can do things which individuals by themselves cannot. Furthermore, as we shall see, Labour has particular ideas of what *sort* of community is a good one. On a *meta-ethical* level (concerning the justifications for ethical prescriptions), Labour avoids the relativism of some communitarian thinking claiming instead that there is a moral agenda which they believe that the one-nation community of Britain, at least, should follow.<sup>7</sup>

There is, then, in New Labour thinking a sociological and ethical communitarianism which provides the modernisers with a framework for public policy-making which in certain areas has a strongly moral flavour concerned with the good life in community. In terms of the culturalisation thesis, we shall argue that New Labour's communitarianism is: first, a *political* response to the New Right and to Old Labour which involves a cultural critique of neoliberal individualism and rights-claiming social democracy; and secondly, a *conservative* cultural turn which marks it off from progressive left politics.

### *Beyond neo-liberalism and social democracy*

New Labour's communitarian arguments have two principle objectives. First, to provide an alternative to conservative neoliberalism. Second, to distance the party from its social democratic past. Communitarianism offers Labour

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<sup>5</sup> We have discussed Labour's communitarianism more fully in Driver and Martell (1997).

<sup>6</sup> We are borrowing here from Simon Caney's (1992) identification of three levels of communitarian argument.

<sup>7</sup> These levels of Labour's communitarianism are evident in a number of places. See, for example, Blair (1995a) and Blair (1996b)

modernisers a political vocabulary which eschews market individualism, but not capitalism; and which embraces collective action, but not class or the state.<sup>8</sup>

Labour's communitarianism challenges the neoliberal market model in two ways. First, it denies that successful economies live by competitive individualism alone: community values like cooperation and collaboration are just as vital to a successful market system. Public-private partnerships, for example, and a role for the state in provision of education and training are essential for economic success. Second, communitarians challenge the neo-liberal belief that welfare is best left to the free play of private enterprise. There is a greater role for government and public agencies in ensuring those who are outside of the labour market can be incorporated back into society. Laissez-faire has contributed to social fragmentation: a dangerous cocktail of poverty and anomie. Social cohesion is in part to be rebuilt through welfare-to-work.

Against social democracy, Labour's communitarians challenge what they see as a statist approach to welfare. This, they argue, has fostered dependency and been too universalistic. It has not allowed sufficient space for devolved management, local initiative or individual choice. It has placed a large fiscal burden on society and contributed to moral decay. The welfare state has undermined the capacity of individuals to help themselves by getting off benefits into work or, where appropriate, by financing their own health, education or pensions. Labour's communitarians challenge the postwar rights-claiming culture which ignored duties and responsibilities. Rights were claimed without reciprocal duties to seek work, or to fulfil parental obligations regarding their children's education, for example.

### *New Labour's right cultural turn*

Labour's interest in communitarianism is a response, then, to perceptions of both neo-liberal individualism and of statist and rights-claiming liberal social democracy. In respect of both, Labour modernisers have deployed cultural-type arguments concerning the values of modern society and the way people live and conceive their lives. As Blair argued in his 1995 Spectator Lecture: 'we do not live by economics alone... a society which is fragmented and divided, where people feel no sense of shared purpose, is unlikely to produce well-adjusted and responsible citizens' (Blair, 1995a; see also Rentoul, 1995, for a biography of Blair which shows the development of this aspect of the Labour leader's thinking). Blair went on to attack what he saw as the 'do your own thing' social individualism of social democracy and the 'get what you can' message of Conservative neo-liberalism. But if New Labour's embrace of 'community' is a cultural turn - a turn away from the essentially socio-economic arguments which defined Old Labour - then it is a *conservative* one

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<sup>8</sup> Labour's communitarianism set out as a reaction to old social democracy and neo-liberalism can be found in many places. See, for example, Blair (1994b; 1995a; 1995c), and many other Blair speeches and statements collected in Blair (1996d). Also Brown (1994).

which shares little in common with the cultural politics of the progressive Left. Indeed, closer affinities may be found between New Labour and the conservative Right (see Scruton, 1996; Gray, 1995). We shall identify dimensions of New Labour's communitarian politics which show the conservative inflection of its cultural turn.

First, Labour is torn between pluralist and conformist communitarianisms. On the one hand, Labour is attracted by the idea of greater pluralism in social and constitutional policy. This is part of its attempt to break with the statism of paternalistic social democracy and with the authoritarian aspects of Thatcherism. The Labour government is pursuing welfare reforms which maintain or extend the decentralisation of social administration (in education and health, for example); and which place greater emphasis on the diversity of provision and on greater individual responsibility (in the funding of pensions and higher education, for example). The Labour Party also came to power in 1997 with major plans for a politically more pluralistic Britain with devolution to Scotland and Wales and reform of English local government.

Alongside these plans for greater devolution, on the other hand, is a far less pluralist discourse, not always clearly defined, which emphasizes the 'strong community'. This discourse has sought to create the ethical foundations for public policy: as the leading moderniser Tony Wright puts it: 'If there is no agreement on what a good society is, or a rejection even of the concept of a good society, then it is scarcely surprising that we have trouble in making progress towards it. Unless we believe in community, as a cohesive and inclusive network of mutual obligations and shared responsibilities, we shall never build such a community' (Wright 1997: 108). In New Labour thinking on social policy, there is an attempt to establish what those 'mutual obligations' and 'shared responsibilities' are in terms of the family, schools and behaviour in public and private spaces - all of which we shall return to shortly. In New Labour's 'strong community', greater emphasis is placed on the individual's conformity to social norms than on the devolution of powers.

A second dimension is between less and more conditional forms of communitarianism. As an alternative to competitive individualism, New Labour emphasises its commitment to government intervention to help the poor and excluded: a communitarianism where the community cares about its worse off members. New Labour talk about a stakeholder one-nation society in which government will help the long-term and youth unemployed and lone parents, for example, and ensure they have a stake and individual opportunities in society (eg Blair 1996a). But this more traditionally socialist or social democratic sort of communitarianism has been joined by a more conditional communitarianism where community help increasingly requires greater reciprocal obligations. So, for example, welfare rights should be conditional on recipients fulfilling certain duties, like accepting a training place when offered; or individuals should be partly responsible for contributing to their fees for their university degree; parents should fulfil obligations on attendance, homework and such like in return for the right to state education. So while there is a strong and clear intention to help the disadvantaged and

excluded, this communitarianism is not merely one-way. Helping others becomes conditional on reciprocity; a shift from a less to a more conditional communitarianism.

On a third dimension, Labour's communitarianism is increasingly conservative and less progressive in the content of the values it supports. To be sure, individual Labour politicians are more or less liberal and progressive on many issues, as they have been in the past. However, in New Labour thinking as a whole, conservative values have come to the fore. The conservative character of Labour's communitarianism can be seen in three policy areas: education, family policy and law and order. In each case, progressive values (and progressive public policy approaches) are being marginalised. Labour modernisers have explicitly rejected many of the liberal and progressive policy positions which were both a feature of the Labour Party since the 1960s and of the Left more generally. On education, David Blunkett has led the attack on 'progressive' teaching and learning methods, insisting that schools should place a greater emphasis on traditional methods, such as whole class teaching, and on the 3Rs to raise education standards. Indeed, in government, Labour have moved to introduce more teaching of the basics (English and mathematics) in primary schools; and even to establish Education Action Zones within which the National Curriculum can be suspended to make more room for the 3Rs. On law and order, Home Secretary Jack Straw has continued to make New Labour as much tough on crime as it is tough on the causes of crime. New Labour's approach to the criminal justice system turns its back on the party's liberal approach, especially regarding young offenders, established in the 1960s. There is a far greater emphasis on the individual's responsibility for their crimes - rather than the socio-economic conditions which might 'cause' crime which was the feature of Labour in the past. There is too in New Labour thinking on crime a much greater prominence given to the family as a factor in shaping an individual's propensity to criminality; and there is more broadly support for the two-parent family as the basic moral unit of society. New Labour has also embraced 'zero tolerance' of petty crime and 'anti-social behaviour' rather than using other social policies to deal with minor deviance. New Labour is unstinting in its support for the rule of law, even when it applies to striking trade unions, environmental pressure groups and the 'socially excluded' like 'squeegee merchants' and the homeless.<sup>9</sup> New Labour's education, family and law and order policies are indicative of how uncomfortable many (although by not all) Labour modernisers are with the 'expressive revolution' and the progressive and libertarian social policies which were a feature of the 1960s and 1970s.

Along a fourth dimension, Labour's communitarianism appears to be increasingly prescriptive rather than voluntary. 'The only way to rebuild social order and stability', Blair wrote, 'is through strong values, socially shared,

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<sup>9</sup> See Blair (1996d), Labour Party (1995b; 1996c; 1996d), Richards (1996), Downs and Morgan (1997), Straw (1996a; 1996b).

inculcated through individuals, family, government and the institutions of civil society'. The Labour leader added that this should not be a recipe for 'a lurch into authoritarianism or attempt to impose a regressive morality' (Blair, 1996e, p.8). Yet in two senses - one to do with moral values and the other with institutional agency - Labour's communitarianism is prescriptive. First, Labour modernisers propose a value-led politics as a means of securing social cohesion: New Labour seem to be saying the moral glue which holds society together has been weakened by too much rights-claiming and too much individualism; and that a Labour government might restore the bonds of social cohesion through an appeal to greater individual responsibility and to shared values and institutions. Such an appeal to shared moral values is at the expense of more socio-economic appeals to redistributive justice and universal welfare provision as the basis of citizenship and social cohesion. While Labour's welfare-to-work programme seeks to bring about social inclusion via the labour market, the reasons for social exclusion are in part seen to be to do with the values and attitudes individuals hold. Moreover, the emphasis on individual responsibility for welfare in New Labour thinking has taken the party away from the idea that citizenship and social cohesion is rooted in socio-economic measures such as a universal welfare state and redistribution.

Secondly, at the level of agency, New Labour's communitarianism is prescriptive because, in the absence perhaps of any alternative, the party's moral agenda is being enacted by central government and by statute. New Labour talks a lot about how the community can do things individuals themselves cannot, but they often fall short of identifying exactly who or what the community is. Blair argues that "'Community" cannot simply be another word for "state" or "government"' (Blair, 1996b). But when Brown and others talk about using the 'power of the community' to pursue Labour's aims it is not clear who the community can be other than the state (Brown, 1994). While we doubt that New Labour could accurately be described as 'authoritarian', it is prescriptive: Labour modernisers demonstrate a willingness as public policy-makers to define and legislate the moral boundaries of the community. In the case of the Labour government's education and law and order policies, it is quite clear that it is central government which is establishing what 'the community' should do: in these social policy areas, dirigisme is still the order of the day.

By contrast, in the economy and regarding business, the Labour government has tamed such prescriptiveness, preferring voluntary agreements to legal sanctions to change corporate behaviour (Blair, 1996a; Darling 1997). This brings us to our final dimension, one which stretches from communitarianism applied to individuals to communitarianism applied to corporations. Here the moral communitarianism of personal responsibilities which go with citizenship rights has not been matched in strength by the economic communitarianism of corporate obligations which go with property rights. Corporate stakeholding, which embodies the latter, has faded away relative to the personal conservative communitarianism of the former. Stakeholding is used less in the stronger sense of obligations to companies other than shareholders. This

was one aspect Blair proposed in his speech to the Singapore business community when he set out stakeholding as New Labour's big idea, and it is what figures such as Will Hutton continue to advocate (Hutton 1995; Blair 1996a; see also Kelly et al 1997). However stakeholding in New Labour thinking has come more to mean helping *individuals* to gain a stake in society, a leg-up into the economy through its welfare-to-work programme. This is less about corporate accountability and more about individual economic opportunities. So the communitarian discourse on individual responsibility in return for rights has continued while that on corporate responsibilities has waned.

### *Labour's communitarianisms and the culturalisation of politics?*

So Labour is torn between conformist and pluralist communitarianisms and increasingly advocates conditional, morally prescriptive, conservative and individual communitarianisms at the expense of less conditional, redistributive, socio-economic, progressive and corporate communitarianisms. The result is that New Labour is more 'cultural' if that is taken to mean that it is interested in the values, meanings and identities of modern society - at the expense of the socio-economics of capitalism in any socialist or social democratic sense. As Labour has moved to accept the policy terrain left by the Conservatives in the 1990s, the politics of New Labour have taken a 'cultural turn'. The new Labour government is interested in the way people live their lives, in families, as neighbours, in the classroom, on the street; it is concerned with the values of modern British society and the extent to which those values bind the nation together: 'one nation, one community', as Blair puts it (Blair 1996b).

However, the character of the communitarianism which New Labour has embraced inflects its cultural turn in a conservative direction, away from the cultural politics of the progressive left. It is ill at ease with the process of social, cultural and individual fragmentation, preferring to grasp onto traditional values and institutions as offering the foundations of social order. New Labour's post-Thatcherite politics - its rejection of social democracy and Thatcherite neo-liberalism - is cultural in the sense that the ethics and institutions of both social democracy and Thatcherite neo-liberalism are seen as having adverse behavioural and social impacts: social democracy created a rights-claiming dependency culture; and Thatcherism promoted a society of egoists. But where the cultural politics of the progressive Left have sought to celebrate the 'expressive revolution' and the multiple identities of (post)modern civil society, and even in some cases the culture of the market (if not perhaps its dynamics), many leading Labour modernisers have viewed the individualism inherent in such processes with unease leading, they believe, to the erosion of the institutions and values which provide the bedrock for social cohesion. And in the face of such processes, New Labour has embraced a cultural politics which appeals to institutions (the nation, the family, the community) and values (obligation, duty) which might re-impose order out of such perceived social and moral chaos.

But if New Labour's communitarianism is a cultural turn, albeit a conservative rather than a progressive one, the idea that New Labour represents a culturalisation of politics needs to be qualified in two senses. First at the level of *explanation*, Labour's communitarianism makes as much sense seen as a *political* response to the New Right and social democracy as it does as an instance of the *culturalisation* of politics. As we have outlined, Labour's communitarianism is in part a reaction to the perceived paternalistic statism and rights-claiming of post-war social democracy and the individualism and authoritarianism of Thatcherism. It may also be partly to do with perceived economic processes such as globalisation which are seen to limit government economic powers; social changes such as the growth of the middle class which are seen to require changes to Labour's electoral message; and electoral limitations on socio-economic solutions such as tax-and-spend, redistribution and corporate stakeholding. It might be that, faced with limited manoeuvrability on economic egalitarianism, the party has moved to a more cultural politics where it feels it *can* have some impact.

Secondly, the cultural conservatism of New Labour's communitarianism is mirrored, however, by a decisive rejection by Labour modernisers of the political economy of socialism and social democracy, as we saw in the first part of this chapter. The cultural critique of the welfare state - that it had adverse behavioural consequences - is interweaved in New Labour thinking with a turn away from the forms of economic management and planning associated with postwar social democracy, and which can be interpreted as a shift politically from left to right as much as from economy to culture. As with the New Right, cultural and economic arguments operate in tandem. New Labour are economically more liberal and culturally more conservative: the latter has not displaced the former.

Taken together, this combination of liberal economics and social conservatism decisively marks New Labour off from the cultural politics of identity, consumerism and difference identified in the culturalisation theses we have referred to above. The liberal economics are concerned not with the celebration of the act of consumption in the market place, but with securing investment, stability and economic growth. But Labour's embrace of the market is not especially desired because of an attachment to a celebration of consumption. Blair, as we have seen, has condemned the acquisitive materialism and greed cultivated by Mrs Thatcher (Blair 1996b). And the conservatism of Labour's moralism is at odds with the difference and identity politics posited as evidence of culturalisation in the theses outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Influenced by postmodernism, these celebrate diversity and difference rather than uniformity and conformity. And they see fulfilment of potential coming through identity politics; whereas New Labour's emphasis, as we have seen, is on economic opportunities in the labour market. Insofar as the individual is important to New Labour it is their opportunities to gain a stake in society; their choice in the face of a pluralism of provision of public and private services; and the responsibilities they owe in return for rights that are of concern: identity is not the crucial issue here.

## The Stylisation of Politics

The last of the five culturalisation theses we outlined at the start of this chapter is less about the substance of New Labour ideas which has been our focus so far and more about the style in which Labour has been presented. According to this thesis politics has increasingly become a matter of image and presentation. The political process and political culture has become caught up in the postmodern world of self-referential signs: a culture composed of constructed images where meaning is relative. In such a world, New Labour is just one soundbite rapidly rebutting another: what 'message' there is, is just a concocted candy floss of words and images in search of votes. This view sees the modernisation of the Labour Party as little more than an image make-over to win over an electorate concerned more with presentation than with policies.

Contemporary party politics is, certainly, as much concerned with image and appearance as it is with the substance of political programmes (Jones 1995; 1997). The modern Labour Party has taken political communications *in Britain* to new heights - much of what New Labour did on the campaign trail had been learnt from Clinton and the New Democrats in the USA (see Rentoul, 1995, chapter 13; Butler and Kavanagh, 1997; Jones 1995 and 1997). Under the direction of Peter Mandelson (who became Labour's communications director in 1985) and Philip Gould (who had been on the campaign trail with the Democrats in the 1992 US Presidential elections), the Labour Party's political communications were thoroughly modernised. Under Mandelson, a 24-hour campaign and media centre was established at Millbank Tower on the Thames in London close to Westminster. This centre worked to the party leadership and was single-minded in keeping the party 'on message' as the election approached: 'Conservative media specialists watched in admiration as Labour politicians repeated their soundbites on the main evening news programmes' (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997, p58). Labour's 'spin-doctors', led by Blair's Press secretary Alistair Campbell (former Political Editor of the Daily Mirror) and Gordon Brown's Charlie Whelan, successfully put across Labour's interpretation of events to the media, albeit bringing accusations of both bullying and flattery. Under Gould's constant prompting, campaigning techniques were brought over the US, most famously the Rapid Rebuttal Unit, a computerised database of information for countering the Tory message (it was used, for example, to respond quickly in November 1996 to Conservative costings of Labour's draft manifesto). Under Campbell, Labour courted the tabloid press, in particular the *Sun* and *Daily Mail*. Hopeful that the Tory tabloids would give Labour an easier ride than they did in 1992, Campbell's strategy proved an even greater success: on the opening day of the election, the *Sun* came out for Blair. Across the country, Labour gathered and collated information on individual voters in key marginal constituencies; and target voters - 'soft Conservatives' and those showing a willingness to switch to Labour - were polled by telephone before and during the election campaign; other computerised marketing techniques like target mailing were used extensively. Labour also commissioned considerable amounts of market research, including small focus groups, to test the party's message. During

the heat of the election battle, Labour candidates were faxed a 'Daily Brief' at 1am to coordinate 'the message'; senior Labour figures including Mandelson, Gould, Campbell and Brown met at Millbank at 7am in preparation for a 8.30am press conference. Meeting throughout the rest of the day, the Millbank 'war room' reviewed the campaign in the light of market research and other feedback (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997). The 'message' Labour sold at the 1997 election was also much influenced by Clinton's New Democrats: the youthfulness and dynamism of Blair and *New Labour*; the idea of 'time for a change'; and of partnership between government and the people. The soundbites, as Butler and Kavanagh point out in their review of the campaign, 'were relentlessly repeated': Labour's were 'Two tier health service', 'Britain deserves better' and 'Enough is enough'. And in this battle of the soundbite, Labour won (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997, p235).

Whether voters responded more to New Labour's style is more difficult to judge. Blair himself proved a thoroughly charismatic leader, able to communicate with the electorate directly in much the same way as he appealed to individual Labour Party members over the heads of sectional groups. His appeal to 'one nation' (and after the election, to a 'patriotic alliance') allowed Blair to distance New from Old Labour and to project the party as a potential government which would unify the country after eighteen years of individualism. Blair's ability to strike a cord with the popular sentiments has served Labour well. As news broke of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997, Blair spoke with apparent emotion, *prefiguring* widespread displays of public grief. He called her 'the People's Princess' and negotiated a public funeral incorporating members of the charities she represented. Blair's own 'compassionate agenda' and concern 'for the many not the few' seemed in tune with a public mood which responded to the Princess's perceived like-minded humanitarianism and popular touch. And in his first Labour conference speech as Prime Minister weeks after Diana's death, Blair claimed that New Labour were expressing a more 'giving age'.

But Blair's 'popular touch', his ability to appeal to the hearts rather than the minds of voters, is not the central point. Whatever happened on the 1997 stump - and politicians since the Great Reform Act have had to present their ideas and policies to the people in bite-sized pieces - New Labour are not reducible to a marketing and media monster created by the party's very own Dr Frankenstein, Peter Mandelson. Beneath the soundbites and the ever more careful packaging *is* something substantial. Many on the left may feel uneasy about New Labour's policies, but policies there are in plenty. This first mistake, then, of a cultural view of New Labour's style is that there is nothing real behind that style. Opinion polls suggest that under Blair's leadership, Labour came to be a party trusted on issues where previously they had been thought of as soft, especially by middle-class voters; in particular the management of the economy and law and order. The presentation of the party may have helped Labour get elected; but in the end what voters found attractive was Blair's policy reforms: on the economy, welfare reform and law and order, which were, in any case, the *substantive* base of the party's soundbites during the election campaign. According to Butler and Kavanagh:

'Surveys do not suggest that many voters decide how to vote on the basis of the skill with which a party's campaign is presented. In 1987 and 1992 Labour was widely judged to have fought at least as good a campaign as the Conservatives but lost both elections decisively' (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997, p237). The messenger could only deliver a message because there was a message to deliver. Indeed, it was the leading Labour moderniser Giles Radice who argued before John Smith's death in 1994 that the message not just the messenger had to change: style alone would not bring the party the 'southern comfort' it needed to win over middle class middle England (Radice and Pollard, 1994).

A second problem with a cultural interpretation of New Labour's political style is that if there is a cultural turn in political communications, it happened some time ago. Political scientists have various names for this process: the 'Americanization', 'personalization', 'presidentialization' or 'modernization' of politics (see Norris, 1997). These names reflect the perceived influence of American campaigning techniques and media coverage on British electoral politics. Rather than being a recent vintage, politics in Britain has taken an 'American turn' since the 1950s, dating to the spread of television and polling (see Rosenbaum). It was in this period that politics was turned into a horse-race: the media treating elections as races between parties, with opinion polls giving a constant up-date on the position of the runners and riders. And the party managers responding by putting more and more attention into grooming the politicians in the media and public eye. This, then, brought accusations of the trivialisation of politics - that it had been turned into a race like any other - and that politics was being personalized. The policy consensus in Britain in the 1950s contributed to this ever growing focus on elections as races between personalities. And so the return of a political consensus in the 1990s has seen a return of politics as a horse-race - and so again to bring forth accusations of its trivialisation. The 1997 election campaign did focus on the characters and personalities of the party leaders. Indeed, the party managers organised their campaigns on the relative merits of their man. 'Campaign reporting', argue Butler and Kavanagh, 'focused to an overwhelming degree on the utterances and the carefully orchestrated activities of the three main party leaders'. They add for perspective that there was also some indignation from the main parties that the media was failing to report what they were saying; and that the broadcast media in particular were relying on what their commentators said rather than the politicians themselves (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997, p90; tables 8.4 and 9.4; and p237).

But even if contemporary British politics is becoming more American - more like the race for the White House than a sober consideration of party policy - does it mark a culturalisation of politics? Again, it is worth emphasising that beneath the spin-doctoring and the media circus of the last election were hard political choices. Some of these concerned policies - devolution and welfare-to-work, for example. Others concerned the competency and even propriety of those who sought to make public policy. In our view, this hardly makes for a postmodern politics of self-referential signs: beneath the soundbites there is something real.

There clearly has been a massive increase through the 1980s and 1990s in the degree of stylisation of Labour politics. A party which previously abhorred slick PR has learned to excel at it. But we would argue that at least as important as style in winning over public opinion have been changes in the *content* of Labour ideas and policies. The basis for Labour being able to present itself in an attractive way to electors was that there was in substance itself something more presentable to the electorate. Key obstacles to Labour's election in the past had been its inability to orient itself towards the desires and attitudes of the electorate. Labour's unilateral nuclear disarmament policy was not accepted by many; its links with the unions led many to fear union domination of a Labour government. People feared that left-wing 'extremism' may dominate a future Labour government and Labour's identification with public ownership was off-putting for many who saw nationalisation as an ideological article of faith unconvincing. Middle-class people especially feared income tax rises. It is no coincidence that Conservative election strategy focused on cultivating negative images of Labour in all these areas throughout the 1980s and 1990s. And it is also no coincidence that Labour modernisation under Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair focused on jettisoning policies in these areas. The key to Labour's electability in 1997 was only in part, we would argue, the carefully stylised presentation of the party. Rather than overriding substance, the key to Labour's credibility of presentation was that it was able to correspond to quite dramatic changes in the substance of party policy. Culturalisation, perhaps, but on the basis of, rather than at the expense of, content.

### **Conclusions: New Labour and the Culturalisation Thesis**

So there is much in the changing ideology of New Labour to support the idea of a culturalisation of politics. Labour is conscious of the cultural underpinnings of the economy. It has a strong ethical dimension to its politics. Its politics have been much stylised. But beyond this Labour fits the culturalisation theses we have outlined less neatly.

First, culturalisation of the economy. New Labour's economics are conscious of culture. Labour have looked at other cultures of capitalism and aspire to achieve some of their strengths. But they argue that cultures and institutions cannot be transplanted. This shows a sensitivity to the cultural underpinnings of the economy. But it does not see cultural change as the basis of economic success. Labour's economic policy is mostly about the economics and social policy needed to secure economic growth rather than culture. The emphasis is still very much on technical economic solutions in economic policy - macro-orthodoxy and micro-supply side measures. Labour's economics are a different economics. But they are still economic and not much culturalised.

The real shift is from traditional social democracy to acceptance of the main parameters set down in the economic approach of their Conservative predecessors. The shift, in short, is from one sort of technical economics to

another and from left to right, rather than from an economic approach to a cultural one. The shift from producer to consumer interests, meanwhile, does not quite amount to a celebration of the culture of commodification. In fact, New Labour has some distaste for such a culture. They are more concerned with consumer choice and rights and as much with the political problems of identification with producer interests as with the cultural joys of consumption.

Secondly, there is social policy and the politics of redistribution. Does New Labour's neglect of the politics of redistribution demonstrate a shift to a more culturalist concern with the politics of recognition and difference? Labour have redefined social justice from economic equality to equality of opportunity. But the move away from egalitarianism has more to do with perceived economic and political limits than a culturalisation of politics. And the replacement of egalitarianism with individual potential is more about opportunities than difference and as much about a shift from the left in a rightwards direction as about one from the economic to the cultural.

Thirdly, Labour's communitarianism is as much a response to political and socio-economic factors as a symptom of a process of culturalisation in politics. It is also as well explained as a shift from left rightwards. To see Labour's communitarianism only as a 'cultural turn' misses out these more political explanations. Furthermore the right neoliberal and conservative substance of Labour's communitarianism marks it off from the cultural politics of identity, consumerism and difference identified in the culturalisation theses we referred to above.

Fourth and finally, the stylisation of politics. Labour have certainly become more style-conscious in their politics. The image has become more important relative to content. But the key to Labour's presentation of itself as a credible political force has been changes in substance. It is changes in unpopular policies, substantive changes in the organisation, ideas and policies of the party and the competence and dynamism of its leadership that have enabled media management rather than been subsumed by it. Image has not superceeded substance in Labour's politics but has, rather, relied on it.

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