# A Convenient Fog?: The Creation of New Labour 1982 – 2010
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## Introduction

As with other organizations, political parties undergo continual evolution and reform; the process of reform may be undertaken in order to meet the changing circumstances of national and global economies. At the same time a political party may change so that it can more readily fulfil the needs and expectations of the electorate. The focus of this paper will be the reasons for the deliberate change undertaken by the British Labour Party (BLP) over a number of decades and through diverse electoral fortunes. The period to be investigated in this paper is the years between 1982 and 2010 when the party, after languishing on the opposition benches governed for 13 years but was then consigned to the opposition benches after suffering defeat to the Conservatives in May 2010. It could legitimately be argued however that, for the BLP, the period of greatest reform is the early 1990s and focussed attention will be given to this period, especially the leadership transition from Neil Kinnock to John Smith and finally to Tony Blair. This paper intends to widen understanding of the evolving precepts and philosophies underpinning the BLP and the imperatives that have driven and shaped it. Its focus will be the BLPs desire to become and remain electable after a long period of opposition from 1979 to 1997. In pursuing this issue, this paper proposes that the BLP's leadership engaged with a complex relationship with the party's ideological and institutional history, and that there was some degree of interplay between the history and the reform of the party. This paper traces some of the processes and ideas at work as the British Labour Party systematically undertook reform of key structures and key ideological statements, perhaps the most significant being the repeal of Clause Four, the statement from 1918 on production and capital that Tony Blair removed from the Party's constitution. This paper will also consider the implications of the Iraq war and its contribution to Blair's defeat.

## Reforming the Party

Attention to political reform inevitably draws attention to parties fighting elections. Electoral success, as the political scientist Andy McSmith points out, is an obvious quest for any political party. Using Tony Blair as an exemplar, he argues that it is a natural assumption that 'the purpose of democratic political activity is to be in government.'[2] After all, a party can accomplish nothing from the opposition benches. But the interpretation of

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this goal reveals an underlying significance. The reforms of the BLP, achieved by the transformational leadership of Tony Blair, were partly determined by the political context of the party. In a reform process ineluctably linked to both electability and leadership, Blair wished to assert the identity of his party in a political climate determined by the ideological right. Reforms of the BLP took place in a context defined by the consistent electoral success of the Conservative Party and the electoral endorsement of Thatcherite ideology. Concomitant to this was the disendorsement of left wing politics. Andrew Scott points outthat '1983 was [the year that] British Labour under Michael Foot crashed to its lowest vote for more than 60 years.'[3] As Tony Benn, a former Labour MP, stated in a contemporary diary entry, 'the scale of the losses [for the BLP] is enormous.'[4] Margaret Thatcher also illustrates the predicament of the Labour Party in 1983. Her personal analysis of the electoral data revealed that 'the size of our victory became clearer and clearer. It really was a landslide. We had won a majority of 144: the largest of any party since 1945.'[5]

Although the reasons for BLP reform may be complex, it is possible to distinguish one main political reason behind the reforms in the BLP: the desire to become electable. For instance, with regard to the BLP, Ivor Crewe and Anthony King point out that the transformation of the party owed much to the relationship it wished to forge with voters,[6] and therefore to the need for electability. It is upon this point that this paper's argument will turn and it will provide the broad focus for this discussion. The process of reform in Britain is demonstrated in the response of the BLP to the heritage of Labourism. The implication of the party wishing to become electable is rarely given the critical analysis that it deserves. Attendant upon this issue is the significance of the historical context and the focus upon political leadership which arises from this context.

It is significant that an often successful accommodation of left-wing heritage contextualizes the BLP's reforms, a point neglected by scholars who have suggested that party reform was achieved at the expense of party history. By emphasizing this point, this paper departs from many previous critiques of modern Labour, which are encapsulated by Benn, who declared as early as 1990 that the party had instituted 'explicit, ideological

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[3]Andrew Scott, *Running on Empty: Modernising the British and Australian labour parties* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2000), p.2.

[4] Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980-90* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p.296.

[5] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), p.304.

[6] Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, 'Did Major win? Did Kinnock lose? Leadership effects in the 1992 election', in Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell and John Curtice (eds), *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Group, 1994), p.127.

rejection of socialism.'[7]  His assessment stands in contrast to his summation in 1983, where he had perceived that the party was reverting to socialism.[8]  In Benn's opinion, by the 1990s there was a paradigm shift in the ideological underpinnings of the party.  Whether revelling in its drawbacks or engaged in defence of it, many commentators have stressed the dissonance between Old and New Labour, as if to suggest that the causes of change were of a kind which implied a complete occlusion between Labour's past and present.  By opposing these arguments, this paper is of course not suggesting that modern Labour is mired in the past.  Labour leaders, as scholarly consensus indicates, are preoccupied with and cognizant of the need for reform.   Paradoxically, in Britain this was accomplished by Blair's articulation of a conservative vision.   Yet he defined the essence of New Labour, and asserted its identity, in the face of a right-wing political context, by drawing upon and incorporating earlier reformist tenets.

Accordingly, a component of this paper's argument is that a consideration of Blair's conservative enunciations articulates the causes of change in the BLP.  The tendency of Blair's vision was to draw upon the reformist legacy of men such as Clement Attlee, Harold Wilson and, most importantly, Anthony Crosland; Blair's agenda was reformist, but he drew upon the reforms of the 1960s and earlier.  Accordingly there has been some successful incorporation of old labour traditions into the new party.  Critics who use terms such as 'crisis'[9] in Labour leadership or philosophy demonstrate the pessimistic interpretation of New Labour and its relationship with social democracy.  However, contrary to the cynical interpretations of the labour parties, it can be deemed that the exchange of ideas between old and new sheds light on both the current state of the BLP and the causes of the reforms which have been put into place.

Of course, Blair, Anthony Giddens, Gordon Brown and other so-called 'architects' of New Labour drew inspiration from other sources beyond their immediate history: America and Australia are notable instances.   In Britain, both the future of the party and the ideological underpinnings which will guide its future are long-standing issues of debate by both academics and politicians. The direction in which the BLP's policies have been pointed has inspired much discussion, because of the deliberate nature of this change and because of its implications for the future of labourism and socialism in Britain.  Blair discusses the implementation of the New Labour brand as follows:

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[7] Benn, *Diaries*, p.591.

[8] Benn, *Diaries*, p.283

[9] Neal Blewett, *Tony Blair and the Crisis of Democratic Socialism* (La Trobe: La Trobe University, 1998), *passim*.

> At one point there was even talk of compromise, 'new Labour', i.e. no capital N. And it wasn't as trivial a point as you might think: New Labour with a capital N was indeed like renaming the party. [10]

Blair's point testifies to the perception among some party members that historical linkages were being removed, yet, as will become apparent, this was not strictly the case.

## Imperatives for reform

With regard to the British Labour Party, several commentators have advanced the finding that the turning point for Labour came after the 1992 election defeat that many argue should never have happened. Heffernan and Marqusee argue that:

> Labour's failure to win the 1992 general election, in the midst of the most severe economic recession since the 1930s and against a party that had been in government for thirteen years, mystified many people, not least the pollsters, whose predictions had been grossly awry.[11]

This defeat highlighted significant problems for the party. Given the unpopularity of the Tory Government at the time led by John Major it had been widely assumed that victory would be inevitable and Labour's failure to win stunned many commentators. After this electoral loss a team was dispatched to America to observe Clinton's successful 1992 campaign. David Michie explains that 'Labour sent over a group of agents to observe the Democrats' workings at first hand; the result was a report which formed the blueprint for Labour's phenomenal 1997 campaign.'[12]

Leadership aspirants within the BLP articulated the electoral imperatives underpinning the reform process. Notably Tony Blair was able to identify wider historical and social problems facing the party. He argued that:

> The collapse of the Labour Party and its electoral base, most painfully dramatised by the 1992 defeat, was only the most obvious sign of a broader shift in politics and society. Labour stuttered when confronted by the new world that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: a more diverse, more fractured society; new industries and new attitudes to work and consumption; and an international order that was both more integrated and yet more unpredictable.[13]

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[10]Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010), p. 85
[11] Richard Heffernan and Mike Marqusee, *Defeat from the Jaws of Victory: Inside Kinnock's Labour Party* (London: Verso, 1992), p.301.
[12]David Michie, *The Invisible Persuaders: How Britain's Spin Doctors Manipulate the Media* (London: Bantam Press, 1998), p.284.
[13]Tony Blair, 'Next Steps for New Labour', (London School of Economics, 2002), p.5.

Blair's analysis showed his recognition that, particularly at a time of profound change, policy reform may be necessary. His assessment takes us beyond Fishman's simpler ideas that Blair simply wished to become electable, and broadens the focus to the notion that policy adjustments have always been an essential part of the need for change..

Blair is credited with the sole objective of conducting a victorious election campaign in 1997. He has been recognized for spearheading much of the reform of the party that led up to this election; his goal from the moment he assumed the leadership was to secure victory. Alan Watkins uses electoral data to affirm that 'Tony Blair [was] the most successful leader of any radical party in the 20th century.' [14]The commentator Peter Riddell points out that the 1997 victory and the BLP's reforms were conjoined. As he wrote in *The Times* 'the key to the Labour victory is the "reinvention" of the party over the past few years.'[15] This was not something that occurred 'in a moment of history': it was a considered, evolutionary change. David Michie considers that:

> The transformation of the Labour Party from the discredited wreckage of the late Seventies to the dynamic and ruthlessly effective New Labour of the new millennium was a remarkable achievement. It is probably fair to say that the process of change, begun under Neil Kinnock and continued during John Smith's brief stewardship, only really came to fruition once Tony Blair was elected leader in 1994.[16]

Michie's observation is a worthwhile reminder that critiques of New Labour tend to iterate the modernity inherent in this particular conceptualization of left-wing politics.

While the imperatives for change are complex, it is, perhaps, not surprising that many analysts are sceptical of the reasons for the reforms. Some attentions to these responses show their potential to perceive a dissonance between 'Old' and 'New' Labour. Among others, in her contribution to the book *The Blair Agenda*, Nina Fishman focuses on the modernization of the BLP, criticizing what she believes to be the superficiality of Blair's reform process. She expresses the belief that pragmatic, indeed coldly logical, reasons informed the transformation of the Party.[17] She has asserted that the reform of the party was purely to win elections. Polly Toynbee and David Walker concur, pointing to the persistence of this interpretation in much New Labour discourse. They dismiss the Third Way as a 'convenient fog.'[18]

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[14]Alan Watkins, *The Road to Number 10: from Bonar Law to Tony Blair* (London: Duckworth, 1998), p. 193.

[15] Peter Riddell, 'Historic victory as voters opt for a fresh start', *The Times* 2 May 1997, p.2.

[16] Michie, *The Invisible Persuaders*, p.285.

[17]Nina Fishman, 'Modernisation, Moderation and the Labour Tradition', in Mark Perryman (ed.), *The Blair Agenda* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1996), p.52.

[18] PollyToynbee and David Walker, *Did Things Get Better?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p.240.

While Fishman expresses scepticism about the reason for change, and Blair asserts that the reasons were both valid and principled, Anthony Giddens highlights the complex nature of the rationale behind them.  He claims that 'Political surveys in this country and elsewhere show that the... shift from Old to New Labour... [was] crucially important in persuading key categories of voters to switch their votes.'[19]  In other words, the changes were essential to attain electoral victory, and Giddens asserts a point central to many analyses of Blair, the Third Way and New Labour.

The terms upon which reform proceeded and the ideological substance of these reforms, are both significant.  The opinion expressed in *The Times*'s editorializing lends support to the notion that Blair drew upon his predecessors in the 1950s and 1960s as transmitting the ideology upon which his reforms rested.  *The Times* cites Blair's declaration that Labour then had to be 'a party that is capable of building a new coalition of support in the country that reaches out beyond its traditional boundaries of support to be a vehicle for the national renewal that I want to see.'[20]  This statement, delivered in the immediate context of Blair's 1997 victory, exists alongside Blair's declaration that 'I know what this is a vote for.  It's a vote for the future.  It's not a vote for outdated dogma or ideology.'[21]  This apparent juxtaposition shows how Blair harnessed the heritage of the BLP and used it to proclaim a modernising reformist message.  Blair chose his words carefully.  He was eager to stress the vitality of his vision; nonetheless it was one which resonated with one, liberal, interpretation of Labour history, in which unionism was subordinate to the claims of social democracy and nationalism.

At this juncture, it is necessary to turn more precise attention to the political forces to which Blair was indebted.  As was explained earlier, New Labour was not a deviation from traditional Labour thinking; it found its matrix between forces which may be described as 'contrapuntal'.  Maurice Mullard, an academic and commentator, gives support to this argument.  He asserts that 'New Labour can be defined as being the process which moves the Labour Party into the political contours shaped by the 18 year conservative legacy.'[22]  It is significant that Blair's perspective on Britain's conservative legacy has been identified as a component of his party since his government took office.  Writing in May, 1997, Riddell pointed out that Blair accepted 'the broad policy framework of the Thatcher and Major

[19] Anthony Giddens, *Where Now for New Labour?* (London: Polity Press, 2002), p.12.
[20] *The Times* 2 May. 1997, p.2.
[21] *The Times* 2 May. 1997, p.2.
[22] Maurice Mullard, *New Labour, New Thinking: The Politics, Economics and Social Policy of the Blair Government* (New York: Nova Science, 2000).

years.'[23]  Blair sought to clarify the differences between the BLP and Thatcherism, arguing that 'Britain under the Conservatives was a long way from lofty ideals.'[24] John Gray contradicts this point of Blair's, arguing that 'In fact, under Blair's leadership, New Labour has turned out to be not so much a successor to Thatcherism as a continuation of it.'[25] Paradoxically reformist and conservative, Blair drew upon the past because of the need to redefine the BLP within a political context determined from the right wing.  In so doing, Blair nonetheless incorporated components of Labour heritage into New Labour.

In Britain, a significant component of the Third Way was the repeal of Clause Four, which loosened the connections between the party and the unions.  Clause Four, written by Sidney Webb and thus coming from an intellectual and political circle that included luminaries such as Beatrice Webb and H.G. Wells, was a venerable and entrenched statement of Labour ideology.  In essence, it declared the merits of workers gaining from their labours and advocated the 'ownership of common means of production, distribution and exchange.'[26] As Tony Blair himself narrates and appreciates, the repeal of Clause Four was a flashpoint and a faultline, and it is this act, whereby Blair advocated its repeal at a Labour Party Conference, that is mostly responsible for perceptions of New Labour as jettisoning the old.  Tony Blair recalls the conference where Clause Four was repealed:

> I had wanted to do it right at the end of my conference speech, and
> so inflammatory was it certain to be that we decided not to say it in
> the bald terms  'Clause IV is going to be abandoned' . This was not
> because we didn't dare to say it outside of the hall, but to say it in the
> hall itself could provoke a really adverse reaction which might mar
> the whole event. [27]

Of course, the conference when Clause Four was debated and then repealed was not the first time that the Party and its conferences had embarked upon both institutional and ideological revisions, a point that is a necessary corrective to accounts of New Labour which see the conference vote on Clause Four as being of singular and unprecedented significance. After the 1979 defeat, and the replacement of Callaghan as leader by Michael Foot, the conference articulated the need for significant change within the Party, including democratizing its processes.[28] John Gray explains that 'New Labour launched a bold campaign to reshape its public image that reached its high point when in 1995 Blair persuaded the party to remove Clause Four (mandating "common ownership of the means of

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[23] Riddell, 'Historic victory as voters opt for a fresh start', *The Times* 2 May, p.2.
[24] Blair, 'Next Steps for New Labour', p.3.
[25] John Gray, 'Blair's project in retrospect', *International Affairs* (2004), p.39.
[26] Watkins, *The Road to Number 10*, p.114.
[27] Blair, *A Journey*, pp.84-5.
[28] Watkins, *The Road to Number 10*, p.146.

production, distribution and exchange") from its constitution.'[29] Blair's recent volume of memoirs recalls the vitriol of the debate and the divisions in party ranks, but also Blair's ideological commitment to removing Clause Four as a specific statement, while more generally adhering to traditional party structures and beliefs.[30]

Maurice Mullard provides a description rather than a definition:

> Labour's Third Way is perceived to be a break with the emphasis on collectivism of past Labour Governments and the concentration on markets of Conservative Governments. The Third Way is perceived to be the politics that seeks to address the challenges of the globalised economy – the Third Way reflects the hopes and aspirations of post modernity.[31]

Mullard's point returns attention to the transformative potential in New Labour and the Third Way, and the impact of transformative leadership in achieving ideological and institutional change to adapt to shifting political and social circumstances. Blair provides the following justification for the repeal of Clause Four:

> Clause IV didn't represent a constraint but an invitation to unfettered indulgence. It was not healthy, wise or, unfortunately, meaningless. At a certain level, it meant a lot and the meaning was bad. Changing it was not a superficial thing; it implied a significant, deep and lasting change to the way the party thought, worked and would govern. [32]

The rationale that would once have underpinned this aspect of the Labour manifesto had been subverted and even debased. Surprisingly, however, both Giddens and Fishman, perhaps two of the most significant yet contradictory commentators on New Labour, fail to perceive the paradox underpinning New Labour. Of course, Fishman is right to stress the importance of winning elections as having underscored, or been the progenitor of, Labour reforms. Yet Fishman, viewing Blair's actions from a Marxist perspective, does not recognize that Blair espoused reform by means of a conservative vision. Such a vision had been a consistent aspect of Blair's public utterances on policy and on the Labour Party. In other words, the changes were essential to attain electoral victory. As shadow home secretary before winning the 1994 leadership contest, Blair took on the Conservative Party overwhat has traditionally been one of its policy strengths: the maintenance of law and order. Vowing to combat rising crime figures, Blair promised via a slogan that he would be

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[29] Mullard, *New Labour, New Thinking*, p.42.
[30] Blair, *A Journey*, p.84.
[31] Mullard, *New Labour, New Thinking*, p.5.
[32] Blair, *A Journey*, p.77.

'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.[33] Yet as Pilkington points out, beyond the banality of the slogan was a more nuanced reaction to crime and the social factors underpinning many anti-social activities. Pilkington reminds us that Blair's policies in this field were intended not to sound soft, but neither were they intended to sacrifice Labour's traditional emphasis on social justice. They were in fact poised between at times contesting and contradictory forces, a situation that recalls much of the creation of New Labour, in which some of the new ideas came from received wisdom.

**Election 2010: What went wrong?**

In May 2010, 13 years of Labour being in power came to an end with the election of David Cameron as the Conservative prime minister. It has been postulated by Blair that the main reason for the collapse of the Labour party was the abandonment of the New Labour brand. Blair offers the following assessment of what went wrong for Labour:

> Labour won when it was New Labour. It lost because it stopped being New Labour… This is not about Gordon Brown as an individual… Had he pursued New Labour policy, the personal issue would still have made victory tough, but it wouldn't have been impossible. Departing from New Labour made it so… 2010 was one we were never going to win – once the fateful strategic decision was taken to abandon the New Labour position. [34]

There is not now time to give full consideration to the validity of Blair's assessment, but the defeat of New Labour by conservatism does bring us full circle in terms of the electoral fortunes of New Labour and the Third Way. The Iraq war was undeniably a factor in the defeat of Blair. The story of Blair's and Britain's involvement in this war has been well told, but merits brief analysis. As Collins points out, Blair's engagement with Middle Eastern crises long predated the election of George W. Bush as President of the United States of America in 2001, even though Bush is the President most commonly linked with Blair's name in assessments of the Iraq War. Blair had nonetheless supported Bill Clinton, Bush's predecessor, in airstrikes against Afghanistan and the Sudan in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden, who was then becoming known as a significant figure in terrorist circles.[35] But following the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, Blair's foreign policy and diplomacy became inextricably associated with Bush's so-called 'War on Terror'. Thomas Lansford calls Blair 'one of the closest allies of U.S. president George W. Bush' and notes the importance of British diplomatic activity to securing, at least initially, the support of

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[33] Colin Pilkington, *Issues in British Politics* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998), p.112.
[34] Blair, *A Journey*, p. 679.
[35] Thomas M. Collins, *Tony Blair* (Twenty-First Century Books, 2005), p.76.

other European powers for intervention in Iraq, even if this was expected to be done through the UN and not result in regime change.[36] The longer term implications of Blair's involvement was the dramatic decline in his popularity as Prime Minister, one concomitant with Bush's as President, and it is hard to locate in Blair's final years as Prime Minister any significant emphasis in public discourse on the transformative social agenda that had originally defined New Labour.

**Conclusion**

Iraq is not the only issue on which Blair should be remembered. Blair considers that: 'of course, you can point to the fatigue after thirteen years, the loss of trust over Iraq, the wear and tear that comes with power, but none of those things is determinative.' [37]However it is an important point to remember that the conservatives remained in power for over thirteen years. 'The Tories' 1992 victory shows it is possible for a party to win again despite thirteen years in power. It could have been done. The 2010 election was our equivalent of 1992, not 1997.' [38]What the Labour Party of the 1980s and especially the 1990s presents to us is one engaged on the active reform, reform where the motivation for it and its implications for the identity of the Party are widely debated, but it is possible to take assessments further than the obvious imperative of winning elections; the way Blair in particular sought to re-orient the Party took place as part of a complex interplay of transformative leadership and the social justice heritage of the Party as well as simply electability.

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[36]Thomas Lansford, *9/11 and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq: A Chronology and Reference Guide* (ABC-CLIO 2011), p.294.

[37]Blair, *A Journey*, p. 681.

[38]Blair, *A Journey*, p.681