**Socialism**

During the industrial revolution the inequalities of free-market capitalism, which trapped some in a cycle of poverty and depravation, created the conditions for the emergence of a new ideology. Socialism was a response to injustice of those inequalities, an ethical philosophy which advocated a more egalitarian society. Its roots, therefore, lie in the industrial revolution and its stance is a critique of capitalism. Socialism seeks the eventual overthrow of capitalism, but socialists argue over the means by which this might be achieved. Britain’s socialist heritage can be traced back to feudal times.

**Diggers and Levellers**

The Levellers were a movement in the English Civil War who put forward such radical, liberal proposals as an extension of the vote to all adult males (1), electoral reform, elections to parliament every two years and religious tolerance. They were not a political party as such, but a group of pamphleteers and reformists who sought the extension of the ‘natural rights’ of citizens and who opposed the monarchy. Their influence waned after the execution of Charles I. They were replaced by the Diggers, sometimes known as The True Levellers, who were a group of English agrarian socialists. Formed towards the end of the Civil War, in 1649, they sought to farm common land (hence the name ‘Diggers’). Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley, envisaged an ecological interdependency between humans and nature and argued that the “common people of England” had been robbed of the land that was their birth-right.

**Utopian Socialists**

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**Robert Owen’s New Lanark**

In the early 19th Century, Utopian Socialists, such as the French philosopher Charles Fourier and Robert Owen in Britain, established experimental communities which Marx later criticised as utopian. Owen created the New Lanark commune in Scotland and later New Harmony in Indiana. His purpose was to establish more egalitarian communities, based on sharing and co-operation, where people could enjoy working together in a more humane environment. His communes were still dependent on the supply of goods and markets from the capitalist world beyond and cannot be seen as a wholesale replacement of capitalism, but merely an improvement on the conditions of craft labour within them. Owen’s purpose was to establish ethical communities which would prove that a workforce treated humanely would be more productive. In turn he hoped this might shame capitalists into replicating his experimental communities and ultimately ameliorate the conditions of the poor: the social and economic change he sought could be achieved naturally, without violent upheaval. In a piecemeal fashion the types of ethical communities he envisaged would spread across the capitalist world until a socialist society would emerge. To some Owen is regarded as the founding father of English socialism.

**Marxism**

Marx believed the idea that Robert Owen’s ‘utopian’ communities might gradually be adopted by capitalists because of the moral and economic advantage they represented was flawed. For him, socialism was about the struggle between the labouring class (the proletariat) and the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie) that would inevitably result in revolution. Writing between the 1840s and 1870s, Marx is regarded by many as the founding father of ‘scientific’ or ‘revolutionary’ socialism. He devoted much of his later life to producing a critique of capitalism, *Das Capital*, which he published with his friend and benefactor, the Manchester businessman, Fredrick Engels. He believed that his objective study of history revealed an account of class struggle that was determined by historical forces (which he called historical materialism). These laws of history would lead ultimately to an inevitable revolution that would see the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist society. To Marx this socialist society represented the end of history.

Marxism is one of the most influential intellectual movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although it found little support in Britain, Marx’s ideas influenced the rise of communism on a significant scale in countries such as Russia and China (although it would be unfair to claim what that emerged in such countries was genuinely Marxist). Central to his thought is the history of the relationship of people to the changing means of production. Human history has been characterised by five key phases and the underlying tensions in each phase lead inevitably to a change, or revolutionary shift, to the subsequent phase (a process which he called dialectical materialism). These five phases are: 1) Primitive communism, in which property is shared and there is no concept of individual possessions; 2) Slave society, in which two distinct social classes emerge: the slave owners and the slaves; 3) Feudalism, in which the hereditary landowners ruled over the serfs; 4) Capitalism, in which the bourgeoisie own the means of production and the proletariat sell their labour for wages and are **alienated** (2) from the product of their labour; and, finally, Socialism (or Communism) in which democratic communes own the means of production and property is once again shared. In the capitalist phase the workers were exploited by the capitalist classes. He believed that the rich would get richer and the poor would become poorer (wages would be forced down in the capitalist’s inevitable drive to increase profits, explained by the idea of ‘surplus value’ whereby the capitalists make profit on the commodities produced by the workers), thus creating the conditions for revolutionary ferment. The growing tensions in capitalist society would create a revolution which would lead to a socialist society in which the ownership of property would be collective, not private. It is a common mistake, however, to claim that Marx believed absolute equality was possible. Instead he argued that a socialist society would see its citizens contributing according to the dictat: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” (*Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1875).

Marx believed in the internationalism of socialism and that the revolution which creates a socialist society could only occur after the whole world had passed through the capitalist phase of production. The final line of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) is: “Workers of all lands unite!”

In this regard **Leninism** is different to Marxism. In 1917 Lenin set about creating a socialist society in Russia. In order to create socialism in a country surrounded by the ever-constant threat of capitalist insurgency, Lenin was forced to maintain the ‘**vanguard party’** (a ruling proletarian elite which Marx believed would lead the revolution, creating a temporary **dictatorship of the proletariat**, but which he also believed would soon wither away). Lenin called his continued maintenance of the vanguard party ‘**democratic centrism’**, but it was certainly not the **‘**withering away’ of the statewhich Marx envisaged in a socialist society. Marx feared that throughout history the state was the oppressive apparatus of the ruling elite. What Lenin created after the October Revolution of 1917 ultimately bore out Marx’s prophecy: the Soviet state apparatus became an instrument of social and political oppression.

In Russia, Leninism was succeeded by Stalinism. **Stalin** believed that it was possible to maintain ‘socialism in one country’ (Russia); a point which brought him into conflict with the internationalist, **Trotsky**. Many see Stalin’s Russia as a totalitarian state. In three decades he changed an agrarian economy into an industrial economy on a huge scale. This was achieved through the collectivization of farms and industry and five year plans which developed a highly centralised ‘command economy’. It was a model which was emulated in Mao’s China. It was far removed, however, from the kind of socialist society Marx envisaged in which the state would ‘**wither away’**. In reality there has never been the kind of socialist society which Marx believed was possible, but contemporary Marxists would argue that the conditions for a truly international revolution have not yet been achieved.

**Democratic Socialism**

Democratic socialism, or socialism through the ballot box, owes its origins to several parallel traditions. The founding father of democratic socialism is Eduard Bernstein who, in distancing himself from Marx’s revolutionary ideas, is regarded as a revisionist. Bernstein associated with Marx and Engels, but believed that the conditions of the working class had improved under capitalism and that, without the need for revolution, it was gradually possible to create a socialist society using democratic means. In the 1890s Bernstein associated with the Fabians, an intellectual, middle class group, whose views on gradualism were also influential in the development of democratic socialism. Both Bernstein and the Fabians viewed socialism as an ethical ideology which would witness the eventual overthrow of capitalism through peaceful, democratic transition. The Fabians believed that the enfranchisement of the working class would eventually allow their numerical advantage to perpetually return socialist governments to parliament.

The trade unions were the third influence on the development of democratic socialism. The rise of the trade union movement representing the new proletariat class provided the conditions which led to the formation of the Labour Party. Already, by the 1870s, trade union sponsored MPs were being elected to parliament in an effort to represent the working class. They sought to press for the reform of capitalism, particularly after the Taff Vale case in 1901. This dispute between strikers and the Taff Vale Railway Company began over the unfair relocation of an employee. It led to a legal ruling that the union was liable for damages caused to the company as a result of the strike, fuelling support for the newly-formed Labour Representation Committee (later the Labour Party) against a government that demonstrated little concern for the industrial proletariat.

Democratic socialism therefore seeks to change society: to replace capitalism with socialism. It seeks to do this through common ownership, as exemplified by the original Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution. Common ownership became synonymous with ‘nationalisation’ in the Labour Party. Democratic socialists also seek a more egalitarian society through progressive redistributive taxation, state education, the provision of municipal housing and universal welfare. They believe in class struggle and that capitalism creates an environment characterised by selfishness and greed, blaming social ills on the conditions which capitalism produces. However, they seek a transformation of society through the ballot box and not through revolution.

**Social Democracy**

Social democracy is a version of ethical socialism that has been heavily influenced by Christian democrats in Europe. It seeks not to overthrow capitalism, being content to work within a capitalist system, but to regulate it in order to curb the unjust excesses of the system. It emphasises equality of opportunity (a liberal notion) rather than equality of outcome (5), and it promotes individual ‘social responsibility’ and rather than blaming capitalism for social ills. Individual rights bring with them responsibilities to the community (communitarianism) and to the wider society. Advancing an ‘enterprise culture’ it is characterised by entrepreneurialism. Instead of progressive redistributive taxation it believes in wealth creation on the basis of Rawls’ notion that it is fine for some individuals to become super rich providing that, by allowing them to do so, they raise the general wealth of society. It promotes a mixed economy where the private sector funds, and even assumes responsibility for, functions formerly managed by the public sector. The birth of New Labour under Tony Blair arguable transformed the party into one which more closely followed the principles of social democracy than democratic socialism.

**Differences between Socialist schools of thought:**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Revolutionary Socialism | Democratic Socialism | Social Democracy |
| On capitalism | Seeks the overthrow of capitalism by revolution | Seeks the overthrow of capitalism by gradualist, democratic means. Socialism through the ballot box. | Accept, but regulate capitalism |
| On the state | Two positions:  Marx believed that the state would wither away after the revolution. It was the instrument of the bourgeoisie. Lenin believed that the state was the vanguard of the revolution. | Seek common ownership, exemplified in the original Clause IV of the Labour Party’s constitution. This became synonymous with nationalisation. The state is also a vehicle for welfare provision, eg the NHS. | Supports the free market and Third Way economics whereby the state is financed and supported by the private sector. |
| On equality | Seeks an egalitarian society. Marx said the socialist society would allow “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. | Seek equality of outcome. | Accepts a more liberal notion of equality of opportunity. |
| On crime | Behaviour, including crime, is moulded by the economic system of the time. | Human behaviour is shaped by the environment. | Humans have individual responsibility for their own behaviour. Anti-Social behaviour should be dealt with robustly. |
| On collectivism | Stresses the collective (eg communes) | Stresses the collective (eg Trade Unions) | Stresses individualism |
| On social class | A class war exists between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This will inevitably lead to revolution. | A class struggle exists. This can be ameliorated by progressive redistributive taxation and state ownership. Tries to appeal to the working class vote. | Tries to appeal to all classes. Catch-all parties. |

**Core Values:**

The Core Values of Socialism are:

Co-operation

Community

Common Ownership/Collectivism

Class War

Equality

Human Plasticity

**Co-operation**

Socialists share an optimistic view of human nature which states that we are all social creatures who are gregarious and, if left to our own devices, we would co-operate. It is capitalism, they argue, which drives human beings to become selfish and competitive, fuelled by an aggressive acquisitiveness that has been instilled in us by the values of capitalist economy. Both morally and economically socialists believe that co-operation makes sense. People can achieve far more by working together than they can do through individual endeavour, and morally people are caring and bonded by affection. Hard work should not be inspired by selfish greed, but by a desire to contribute to the common good of society. Such ideas are apparent, for example, in the co-operative movement where people work for mutual benefit.

The Co-operative Movement began in the early nineteenth century. It involved societies purchasing goods in bulk and selling them cheaply to their, often poor, members. Among its founders were Robert Owen and William King. In 1844 the Rochdale Pioneers, opened their first grocery store, which helped inspire the North of England Co-operative Movement, based in Manchester, in 1863. This movement launched 300 Co-operative stores across Yorkshire and Lancashire.

**Community**

It follows that if socialists believe that humans are, by nature, co-operative, they are drawn to the idea of community as the best and most effective organisation to tackle social and economic problems. Collective action achieves more than individual effort, encapsulated in John Donne’s assertion that ‘No man is an island’. The socialist notion of community can be found in the ideas of Charles Fourier and Robert Owen (see below) and in the trade unions’ belief in the principle of ‘fraternity’. Community also has an international dimension. We are all ‘comrades’ or ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’ in a global community. It was this internationalism that drove many socialists to become conscientious objectors in the first and second world wars.

**Common Ownership/Collectivism**

Socialists believe that competition, which is the cornerstone of capitalism, is wasteful, inefficient and creates unjust inequality. It leads to the selfish acquisitiveness of materialism and is morally corrupt. Instead they advocate the abolition of private property and the implementation of collectivist policies in which property is held in common ownership. This idea was enshrined in the original Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution, which was written by the Fabian, Sidney Webb, in 1918. This committed the Labour Party to the ‘common ownership’ of the means of production, which eventually became synonymous with **nationalisation**. In turn, this became most apparent in Attlee’s post-war government (see below) in which he nationalised the ‘commanding heights’, or key industries, of the UK economy. The collectivism of socialism contrasts markedly with the individualism of liberalism. Socialists believe that collectivism unlocks human potential and creativity, whereas individualism is isolating and barren.

**Class struggle**

For socialists the most significant social division is not gender, or ethnicity, or age, but social class. Marx believed that the division between social classes characterised the different phases of the historical development of societies and the tensions between them resulted in revolutionary change. For Marx, in the capitalist phase, there were two distinct classes: the bourgeoisie, those who owned the means of production, and the proletariat, those who sold their labour for wages.

Under the capitalist phase of development socialism has been an expression of the interests of the working or labouring classes. It strives to remove the unjust inequalities in society and to end the exploitation of workers by capitalists. In so doing it seeks to create a more egalitarian and just socialist society.

The emphasis of class struggle as a value which is central to socialism waned in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century. The collapse of manufacturing industries and a consequent shrinking working class has forced the Labour Party to re-evaluate its stance on social class as a core value. Elsewhere within the socialist movement the emphasis has shifted to feminism, environmentalism and anarchism.

**Equality**

Equality, it can be argued, is a central tenet of socialism. Traditional socialists espouse equality of outcome; social democrats pursue equality of opportunity and look to eradicating poverty. Capitalism inevitably creates inequalities and an unequal distribution of resources brought by economic or inherited privilege. Traditional socialists seek to end this injustice. The ways in which they seek to arrive at a more equal society vary. Revolutionary socialists believe a revolution will generate a more equal society. Democratic or parliamentary socialists believe that progressive redistributive taxation, combined with common ownership of property, will gradually remove inequality. Attlee’s post-war Labour government introduced the NHS and welfare state, free at the point of entry for all its users. It also took into common ownership key industries. The state, or the people, rather than private entrepreneurs, would benefit from the nationalised industries.

Socialists therefore argue that everyone should be treated equally in regard to their access to resources and material goods. For example, they propose that everyone should have equal access to health care and education. Economic privilege in relation to such services should be removed as it is unfair and divisive. Egalitarianism therefore underpins the values of community and co-operation, strengthening social solidarity. Social equality also allows for the fulfilment of human needs. It requires the eradication of poverty and depravation.

**Human Plasticity**

In the ‘nature’ versus ‘nurture’ debate, socialists are clearly on the side of those who believe in nurture. Human beings are moulded by their environment and by the economic system of the time. Thus capitalism corrupts us. It makes us greedy and acquisitive, motivated by self-interest rather than the needs of the wider community. Crime is not the ‘free choice’ of individuals who commit it, but a conditioned response to their social circumstances. Human nature is therefore ‘plastic’ or malleable. It can be shaped by the society in which we live. A socialist society would imbue its citizens with values of co-operation and community, rather than selfishness.

**Key thinkers:**

**Charles Fourier:** (1772-1837) was a French philosopher who believed in the importance of community spirit, which he considered to have been eroded under capitalism. He advocated the creation of small communes (‘phalansteries’) which would provide a minimum standard of living and good education and housing for their citizens. He believed that socialist communes would restore creativity and co-operation among their citizens.

***Fascinating fact:***

Fourier believed in advancing women’s rights and is credited with first using the word ‘feminism’.

**Robert Owen** (1771-1858) was a Welsh social reformer and philanthropist who established utopian socialism in Britain and was one of the founders of the co-operative movement. He created model factory communities in New Lanark and New Harmony which established humane working and living conditions for the factory workers. New Lanark was a mill community which he bought from his father-in-law, the philanthropist David Dale, in 1813. Among those who helped fiancé the Mill was Jeremy Bentham (see the Chapter of Liberalism). A friend of Bentham’s later said that his involvement in the New Lanark Mills was the only sound financial investment he ever made (3).

He believed that factories should be developed on higher moral principles than the capitalist drive for profit and that his communities, by example, would shame others into following those principles. He hoped that such communities would be adopted by individuals, by parishes, by counties and even by the state.

***Fascinating fact:***

It was Karl Marx, in criticising Owen’s ideas, who first coined the phrase ‘Utopian Socialism’.

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**Karl Marx** (1818-1883) was a German-born philosopher who is regarded as the founding father of ‘scientific’ or ‘revolutionary socialism. Marx studied at the University of Bonn and the University of Berlin, where he became interested in the ideas of the Young Hegelians. He moved to Paris in 1843, where he began writing for radical newspapers. In 1849 he was exiled and moved to London. Throughout much of his adult life he was supported by his friend Fredrick Engels, a Manchester businessman and co-author of a number of Marx’s works, including *The Communist Manifesto* and Das *Kapital*. Marx only ever completed the first volume of Das Kapital in his life time and it was left to Engels to make sense of his fragmentary notes after his death. Not long before he died Marx is reputed to have said “I am not a Marxist”. This underlines the objectivity which he believed his work demonstrated. Marx is buried at Highgate Cemetery in London.

***Fascinating fact:***

Marx was plagued by boils from head to foot. He dosed himself with such extra ordinary medicines as creosote, opium and arsenic but the boils continued to debilitate him for years on end and he could only comfort himself by reflecting that the bourgeoisie would have good cause to remember his sufferings from ‘this truly proletarian disease’.

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**Karl Marx’s tomb, Highgate cemetery, London**

**Eduard Bernstein** (1850-1932) was a German philosopher who is regarded as the founding father of democratic socialism and revisionism. Bernstein had associated with both Marx and Engels, but could not accept Marx’s view of history and the inevitability of revolution. Instead he asserted that socialism could be achieved through democratic means, or socialism through the ballot box. He agreed with the Fabians, with whom he also associated during his time in England in the 1890s, that socialism could be achieved through evolution, rather than revolution, or ‘gradualism’ as it became known. This, he believed, was a more ethical form of socialism as if avoided the need for a violent revolution. His revising of Marx’s revolutionary ideas led to him being labelled a ‘revisionist’.

***Fascinating fact:***

Opponents of Bernstein’s revisionist ideas claimed that they had arisen because he had come to see the world “through English spectacles”.

**Anthony Crosland** (1918-1977) was an influential thinker in the Labour Party during the 1950s and 60s. Crosland was a revisionist who, in his book *The Future of Socialism* (1956), argued that Marxism offered little of relevance to modern society and that nationalisation was not the only way for British socialism to achieve its objectives. He argued that the working class was becoming more affluent and that government intervention to secure equality was no longer necessary. He believed that socialism was about values such as social justice, equality of opportunity and social equality, seeking to end poverty and improve education and health care – ideas that were later to be accepted by New Labour in the 1990s.

***Fascinating fact:***

**Tony Benn** (1925 – 2014) particularly disagreed with **Anthony Crosland** arguing that all major industries should be state owned in order to achieve economic equality.

**Anthony Giddens** (1938-Present) was Director of the London School of Economics and Professor of Sociology at Cambridge whose book, *The Third Way* (1998), influenced **Tony Blair’s** Third Way thinking. The Third Way recognised globalisation and new technology and sought to create an enterprise culture which combined dynamic markets with ideas of social justice and social inclusion. It is pragmatic, allowing private sector involvement to finance, support and develop the public sector, believing that both the state and the markets should serve the public interest.

**A Brief History of Socialism in Britain**

**Beginnings:**

Socialism in Britain has been largely represented by the Labour Party which describes itself ‘democratic socialist (4)’. The widening of the franchise in 1867 and 1885 helped establish the conditions which allowed for the party’s formation. The party grew out of the trade union movement and the socialist parties of the late nineteenth century: the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, the Fabian Society and the Scottish Labour Party. Traditionally it has favoured socialist policies such as the redistribution of wealth, the public ownership of key industries, government intervention in the economy, increased workers and trade union rights and a commitment to the welfare state and state education.

The party was formed in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee and adopted the name ‘the Labour Party’ in 1906, when it chose Keir Hardie as its leader. Hardie had led the Independent Labour Party but after securing few votes in the 1895 general election he recognised the need to combine with other socialists groups. Early in its history, the Labour Party entered into an electoral pact with the Liberal Party, aimed at avoiding a Labour/Liberal contests in seats where Conservative candidates might be defeated. This arrangement helped the party win 29 seats in the 1906 general election.

**The First Word War and its aftermath**

The First World War provided both opportunities and challenges for the newly created Labour Party. Among its greatest challenges was the fact that war is contrary to internationalism, a core belief of socialism. This tension led to a split within the party with the anti-war campaigner Ramsay MacDonald resigning as party leader. It was left to Arthur Henderson to lead the party into a wartime coalition government led by Lloyd George’s Liberal Party. Factions within the party opposed Henderson’s support for mobilisation and conscription, but the party did have an opportunity to gain experience of government. No longer was it possible to dismiss the Labour Party as a party that lacked experience of office.

In 1918 the Fabian, Sidney Webb, wrote Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution which committed the Labour Party to ‘common ownership’ of the means of production, or nationalisation. By 1922 the Labour Party had supplanted the Liberals as the second largest party in Westminster, buoyed by damaging splits within the Liberal Party over the question of Home Rule. Support for Labour was particularly concentrated in the industrial heartlands of the North East, Wales, Scotland and the Midlands.

**The First Labour Government**

In 1924 a reinstated Stanley Baldwin led the Labour Party to its first parliamentary victory in a general election. The party formed a minority government which lasted just nine months. Though brief, this period in office further served to demonstrate Labour’s credibility as a party of government. As the first socialist government in Britain it achieved only modest aims in housing, education, unemployment and social insurance. In particular, the Wheatley Housing Act provided for new homes for working class families. But the Labour government was limited in its ambitions by its dependency on the Liberal Party for support in Westminster. An establishment collusion to heighten public anxieties about possible links between the Labour Party and Russian communists, culminating in the infamous Zionviev letter, which was published by the *Daily Mail*, led to defeat in the general election of October 1924.

In 1926 the party further compromised its socialist credentials by the position it adopted over the General Strike. Ramsay MacDonald was against the strike. He argued that the best way to achieve social reform was through the ballot box, not through strike action.

**The second Labour Government**

The general election of 1929 saw Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour Party again returned to government. However, this was a difficult time for a minority Labour Government. An international economic crisis triggered by the Wall Street Crash placed Labour in an impossible position. Unemployment was rising and the government found itself trying to maintain unemployment benefit at the same time as trying to maintain the value of the pound by achieving a balanced budget. These two contradictory aims could not be reconciled. In 1931 the Labour Government found itself instigating cuts in public-sector wages and public spending (including unemployment benefit) in an effort to tackle the deficit. This was an anathema for a socialist party committed to the values of common ownership and equality, and it led to a bitter rift between MacDonald and several of his senior ministers, including Arthur Henderson. When MacDonald moved to create a National Government, embracing the Conservative and Liberal Parties, he was expelled from the Labour Party and Henderson became party leader. Despite going on to win the general election of 1931 under the banner of a National Government, MacDonald was considered to have betrayed the Labour movement.

In the 1930s the Labour Party moved further to the left and its electoral fortunes began to revive. Its programme *“For Socialism and Peace”* (1934) committed the party to the nationalisation of key industries, including coal, steel, the power companies, and the banks, as well as creating a ‘command economy’ controlled by a ‘National Investment Board’. These ideas were the precursor to the reforms introduced by Attlee’s post-war Labour Government. But the party’s pacifist stance was eventually abandoned in 1937 in favour of rearmament. In 1940 the party was again invited to join a wartime coalition, occupying seats in Churchill’s War Cabinet. Attlee, the party leader, became Britain’s first ever Deputy Prime Minister in 1942, affording him the experience he would later draw on as Labour’s post-war prime minister.

**Attlee’s government**

The surprising landslide victory to Labour in 1945 saw Attlee become the first Labour Prime Minister ever to secure a full term in government. Attlee’s government is arguably the most socialist of the Labour governments to date. Under Attlee the NHS was created and the welfare state was established. These allowed for access to healthcare that was free to all at the point of entry and a system of welfare benefits that supported those most needy in society and which tackled what Beveridge called the five evil giants of “squalor, idleness, ignorance, want and disease”. Such initiatives arguably produced a more egalitarian Britain. Alongside this, Attlee launched an ambitious programme to nationalise what he called the “commanding heights” of the economy. These included the public utilities, such as British Gas and the Water Board, and heavy industries such as steel and coal. This move was the first significant attempt by a Labour government to implement Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution, creating common ownership and holding key industries for the common good. In addition, Attlee began on a programme of decolonisation, which accords with the internationalism and egalitarianism of traditional socialist views.

However, Attlee’s programme was by no means universally acclaimed as ‘socialist’. Within his own party, those in the ‘Keep Left Group’ criticised him for not going far enough in taking into common ownership British industry. Others pointed to the fact that his programmes relied heavily on the ideas of two liberals: William Beveridge, whose report led to the creation of the welfare state and the NHS, and J.M. Keynes, whose economic orthodoxy of government intervention lay behind Attlee’s programme of nationalisation. Indeed, subsequent Conservative governments did little to dismantle these achievements, prompting ‘Butskellism’: the consensus orthodoxy of the 1950s (6).

**Thirteen wasted years**

In the 1950s the Labour Party was blighted by divisions over three key issues: nuclear disarmament, Clause IV, and proposed membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). An unsuccessful election campaign in 1959 saw Macmillan’s conservative government increase its majority. Hugh Gaitskell, then Labour Leader, blamed those on the left of the party for the defeat. At the party conference in 1959 he unsuccessfully attempted to amend Clause IV to end the party’s commitment to nationalisation and to change the name of the party to ‘Modern Labour’. He also failed to prevent a vote which adopted unilateral nuclear disarmament as a policy (a decision reversed the following year). Gaitskell was supported in his revisionist ambitions by the Labour MP Anthony Crosland.

Gaitskell was also opposed to Britain’s membership of the EEC, which the Conservative government attempted to negotiate in 1962. He claimed that it would signal “the end of Britain as an independent nation state”. Then, unexpectedly, Gaitskell died suddenly in 1963. He was succeeded by the media-savvy Harold Wilson who coined the phrase “thirteen wasted years” as the slogan for the 1964 general election, claiming that the last thirteen years had been wasted by successive Conservative governments.

**The Wilson Years:**

Wilson won the general election of 1964 with a slender majority of just 4 seats. He attempted to position the Labour party as a modernising party that embraced the benefits of science and technology, telling the 1963 party conference that under socialism Britain would be ‘forged’ in the ‘white heat’ of a technological revolution. In government he created the Ministry of Technology to oversee the development of high-tech projects. In his time in office he did little to implement Clause IV, merely reclaiming British Steel into common ownership after the Conservatives had denationalised it. He did seek to create a centralised ‘command economy’ through the creation of the Department for Economic Affairs, although this never succeeded in implementing its National Plan. The 1960s saw a Labour government legislate on divorce, homosexuality and abortion, and the ending of capital punishment, and introduce equal pay laws. Wilson also oversaw the development of comprehensive education and the Open University. Arguably these last two initiatives might be considered more liberal than socialist, although they represented an attempt to create a more egalitarian society.

On the other hand, Wilson supported the Vietnam War, which was contrary to the internationalism of socialism, and, ultimately, he was forced to establish a pay and incomes policy, implementing strict controls on public spending. Through the ‘In Place of Strife’ programme, he sought to introduce legal rights for trade unions, but also restraints on their power. The unions were angered and the bitter disputes which characterised the 1970s began. The Wilson and Callaghan governments of the 1970s sought to implement higher taxation for the wealthy, with the Chancellor, Dennis Healey, promising to “squeeze the rich”, but serious efforts at wealth redistribution were hampered by Britain’s ailing economy. The car manufacturer British Leyland was nationalised in 1975 and, in 1977, British Aerospace, the British National Oil Corporation and the remaining shipyards were nationalised. But Callaghan’s government was afflicted by spiralling inflation and militant industrial action, culminating in the Winter of Discontent (1978-79). The Labour government lost a confidence motion in the House of Commons in March 1979 and in the resulting general election the Conservatives were swept to power under Margaret Thatcher.

**The 1980s**

Ironically, it was while in opposition in the 1980s that the Labour Party became most socialist. A system for deselecting candidates was introduced by the left-wing MP, Tony Benn. This allowed left-wing party activists and trade unions more power over choosing Labour candidates.

Alarmed by the party’s leftwards drift, four prominent centrist Labour MPs ([Shirley Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shirley_Williams), [William Rodgers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Rodgers), [Roy Jenkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roy_Jenkins), and [David Owen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Owen)) left the party to create a new center-left party: the Social Democratic Party (SDP). Within six months 25 MPs from the Labour and Conservative Parties had crossed the floor of the house to join the SDP. The new party’s poll ratings were high and at one stage it was predicted to win 600 seats in the 1983 general election. Instead it won just 6.

Under the leadership of Michael Foot the Labour Party of the early 1980s adopted such socialist policies as unilateral nuclear disarmament, further nationalisation, support for the unions, withdrawal from the EEC and NATO, and the abolition of the House of Lords. These policies were evident in the 1983 manifesto, which led to Labour’s worst electoral defeat ever and the Labour MP, Gerald Kaufman, calling it “the longest suicide note in history”.

After the electoral defeat Neil Kinnock was elected as party leader. He began to reform the party, expelling the Trotskyist group Militant Tendency and reversing policy on withdrawal from the EEC and NATO. He also disbanded the Young Socialists, which was seen as a far-left group, and centralised the party structure. On policy formulation he abandoned Labour’s traditional commitment to high taxation. Kinnock has been credited with being a key figure in modernising the Labour party as he realised that Labour did not have an electorate future if it only appealed to the traditional working class voter in the declining heartlands. He realised the party needed to attract the C2s if it was to win an election. But his more centrist message did not convince the voters and, despite poll predictions that Labour would win the 1992 general election, Kinnock led them to their fourth successive electoral defeat.

The mantle of party leader was handed to John Smith. Smith embarked on a programme to democratise the party and in 1993, secured One Member One Vote for the party leadership elections. Tragically, though, Smith died of a heart attack in May 1994.

**Blair and New Labour**

The leadership election that followed Smith’s death saw the election of Tony Blair as leader. Blair immediately set about modernising the party and establishing “catch all” policies that would appeal to ‘middle England’. No longer, he argued, could Labour rely on its traditional core vote. With the loss of manufacturing and heavy industries in Britain the working class had shrunk. Blair’s New Labour had to appeal to the C1s and C2s (7).

In 1995 Blair abandoned Labour’s commitment to common ownership, rewriting Clause IV to offer “power wealth and opportunity in the hands of the many not the few.” Out, too, was Labour’s commitment to progressive redistributive taxation. New Labour promised not to increase taxes. Instead Mandelson and others talked of an enterprise culture, accepting Rawls notion that inequalities in wealth are acceptable as long as they benefit the wider society. There was therefore no attempt to regulate the finance sector which the Conservatives had deregulated. Moreover, no attempt was made to restore power to the unions stripped away by Thatcher, or to renationalise the public utilities which Thatcher had enthusiastically privatised. Indeed, Blair once described himself as the “heir to Thatcher”.

In the 1997 general election campaign Blair declared that his three priorities were “education, education, education”. In office Blair did increase public spending on health. He also legislated for devolved assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. He signed the UK to European Convention of Human Rights, passing the Human Rights Act (1998), and worked tirelessly to ensure the success of the Good Friday Agreement which brought greater peace and stability to Northern Ireland.

His economic policies were built around the Third Way, which he argued was a synthesis between free market liberalism and democratic socialism. Third Way economics became the mantra of New Labour, abandoning many socialist principles. The Third Way stresses technological development, education, competitive mechanisms and communitarianism (the need to balance individual rights with the interests of the community as a whole). Blair’s language typically embraced the concept of ‘social responsibility’ (he once talked not of ‘socialism’, but of ‘social-ism’) and many observers position Blair’s New Labour within the spectrum of social democracy rather than democratic socialism.

Blair did introduce the National Minimum Wage, signing Britain up to the Social Chapter, and tried, unsuccessfully, to tackle poverty. But the public sector, which represents common ownership, became increasingly reliant on private sector funding (PFI) and expertise (PPP), and even the health service became more market-orientated in the creation of Foundation Hospitals. Blair also supported the USA in the war in Iraq, sidestepping the internationalism of traditional socialists, and was more social authoritarian with pronouncements such as “tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”, which run contrary to the socialist perception of ‘human plasticity’ (individuals turn to crime as a result of their environment and not through rational choice).

**Gordon Brown**

Blair was followed by Brown who largely continued the New Labour experiment. There was some glimmer of hope for traditional socialists in Brown’s nationalisation of the ailing banks, Northern Rock and the RBS, but this was only ever a temporary measure. His ‘quantitative easing’ was neo-Keynesian, so arguably more liberal than socialist, and his ill-fated constitutional reforms owed more to liberalism. Brown’s major challenge became tackling the deficit after the international economic downturn of 2008, and his response more pragmatic than ideological.

In 2010 Brown faced a difficult election campaign. Branded as a bully by journalists, ill at ease in the first ever national TV debates between party leaders, and exposed calling a life-long Labour supporter a bigot in the so-called ‘Bigotgate’ debacle, Brown failed to win the confidence of voters. Immigration became one of the central issues of the 2010 general election, with Labour proposing an Australian-style points-based system to limit unskilled migration from outside the EU, but this also lacked electoral appeal. The lack-lustre campaign led to Labour’s defeat and the creation of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government.

**Ed Miliband**

In autumn 2010 Ed Miliband became leader of the Labour Party. His dilemma was equally as challenging as Brown’s: to find an ideological identity for the Labour party given that New Labour’s economic policy was discredited by the deficit and its foreign policy was discredited by the Iraq War. Indeed, Miliband was swift to distance himself from the Iraq War, criticising the conflict as ‘illegal’. The fact that he had been elected by a narrow margin over his brother, David, because of the Union block vote led some to believe he would return the party to its more traditional socialist, pro-union roots. The right-wing press were swift to label him as “Red Ed”. But Miliband was quick to assert: “I am my own man” and not in the pockets of the Unions.

Heppell (8) suggests that there have been three phases in Miliband’s leadership to date. The first phase, ‘Red Labour’, was short lived and illusory, more an attempt at media scare than an objective assessment of his stance. The second phase, ‘Blue Labour’ was an attempt by Miliband’s adviser, Lord Glasman, to reposition Labour to appeal to its working class core voters. Glasman believed that the Labour Party needed to face the concerns of working class voters head-on, notably by offering to freeze immigration (9).

This ‘conservative socialism’ also emphasised traditional family values, which did not endear the idea to Harriet Harman, Labour’s feminist deputy leader. By July 2011, Glasman’s influence on Miliband was waning. It was replaced by ‘Purple Labour’, an attempt to return to the principles of ‘New Labour’. This approach is advocated by Mandelson, amongst others. It appeared in a publication at the 2011 party conference, *The Purple Book: A progressive future for Labour*. It proposes an acceptance of the ‘uncomfortable reality’ that the electorate has accepted the coalition’s explanation of the financial crisis and policies around education credit and universal childcare.

Miliband was searching to find a policy direction for the party. So what have been Labour’s policy proposals under Ed Miliband? To date he has proposed ‘Predistribution’ (the idea that companies should invest in, for example, childcare for employees and should pay a “living wage” rather than the national minimum wage); curbing socially irresponsible capitalism (companies which takeover and asset strip other companies); breaking up the banks (separating the investment, so-called ‘casino’, operations from the high-street banks); regulating the energy companies, including a freeze on energy prices for 20 months; building more affordable homes; and , at the 2012 Autumn conference, ‘One Nation Socialism’ (a term deliberately borrowed from the Conservative party envisaging a Britain where there is “shared responsibility” for economic growth and where there is greater equitability). He said: “The next step is to help more people…have the dignity of earning a living wage. This is one way we can begin building a One Nation economy where prosperity is fairly shared, because it is only by coming together as a country that we can succeed.”(10)

In 2014 Labour further fleshed the bones of its policy proposals. It is committed to a Mansion Tax (an idea originally borrowed from the Liberal Democrats) and to raising the top rate of income tax to 50p. These are arguably socialist in nature, born of such values as egalitarianism and social justice. In the 2015 general election campaign the party promised: cutting the deficit to create a balanced budget by the end of the next parliament (while demonstrating fiscal responsibility, this is not a socialist proposal), raising the minimum wage to more than £8 per hour by 2019, freezing energy bills until 2017, a mansion tax on properties worth more than £2million to raise money for the NHS, and to re-introduce the 50% top rate of income tax for people earning over £150k (these are arguably a socialist policies).

The party lost heavily in the 2015, prompting much soul-searching as to whether to move back to the values of Blair’s New Labour, or whether to embrace more socialist policies (as advocated by the Unite union president, Len McCluskey). A protracted leadership debate saw the party searching desperately for a new identity and a means to attract wider support amongst the electorate.

**The Rebirth of British Socialism?**

On the face of it, Socialism has found a new voice in British politics. The Labour Party leadership contest has resulted in victory for the left-wing backbench MP Jeremy Corbyn. The political ideology of the Labour Party is apparently set to change again.

In his first speech to the Labour Party electoral conference, Corbyn made several oblique references to socialist core values. He spoke of the need to build a more equal society (***equality***), of the injustice of inequality in modern Britain and the need to tackle poverty (***class struggle***)***,*** of the need for the newly energised party, with its thousands of new supporters, to work together to bring about the politics of change (***co-operation***), and of the moral duty facing this country to accept the current wave of refugees from Syria and elsewhere, because, he said, they are people too (***internationalism***). He addressed his fellow party members as ‘comrades’ (***fraternity***) and his policies include the renationalisation of the railways and a possible return to the old Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution (***common ownership***)***.*** He would like to introduce higher taxes for the rich and a ‘maximum wage’ for chief executives, he is a republican (so anti-monarchy) and to print money (quantitative easing) to fund housing, energy and transport projects.

Whether he will be able to translate this rhetoric into an electable programme for government and to unite a divided party only time will tell.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the Labour Party has only occasionally reflected traditional socialist ideas in its policies or programmes, particularly in government. Attlee’s government was arguably the most socialist Labour government, criticised as it was for not being socialist enough in its ambitions, and the most socialist programme was forged under Michael Foot in opposition and rejected by the electorate. The argument that the party has been more concerned with ‘labourism’ than socialism is persuasive to some. In twenty-first century, however, Labour became more a ‘catch-all’ party of pragmatism; but Corbyn’s election as leader has reignited the debate about Labour’s socialist credentials.

**Useful websites**

[www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk) This is the official website of the British Labour Party.

[www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk) The Fabian society is a socialist think tank promoting gradualism.

[www.party.coop](http://www.party.coop) The Co-operative Party is a part of the co-operative movement affiliated to the Labour Party. It does not put forward its own candidates for election; instead its candidates stand as ‘Labour and Co-operative Party’ candidates.

[www.bluelabour.org](http://www.bluelabour.org) This faction within the Labour Party supports socially conservative views on such issues as immigration, crime and the EU.

**Further reading:**

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Woodley, D., Political Ideologies, Philip Allan, (Oxford; 2009), Chapter 3.

Hoffman, J., *Socialism,* Philip Allan, (Oxford, 2006).

McLellan, D., *Marx*, Fontana, (London, 1975).

Blair, T., *A Journey*, Arrow (London, 2012).

Slesdon, A., and Lodge, G., *Brown At 10*, Biteback, (London, 2010).

**Accessible primary sources:**

Marx, K., *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

**Endnotes**

1. At the time about one in five adult males or less than 3% of the total population had the vote. These were mostly property owners or taxpayers. The picture was not uniform across the country and varied from borough to borough. In some boroughs all householders (the ‘commonality’) voted; in others those with their own hearths (the ‘potwallers’) voted; and in others all taxpayers or freemen voted (the ‘scot and lot’). These discrepancies fuelled the Leveller’s argument.
2. Alienated means to be separated from one’s true nature, work becoming a mere commodity under capitalism, rather than a fulfilling, creative enterprise in its own right.
3. New Lanark Conservation Trust, *The Story of Robert Owen, A Brief Guide to his Life and Work*, NLCT (New Lanark, 1997), Fourth Edition, 2012, p 12.
4. www.labour.org
5. *Equality of opportunity* is a belief that everyone should be *treated* equally and that the barriers of prejudice, preference and lack of privilege should not hamper a person’s chances in life. It proposes that where someone is disadvantaged there should be compensatory mechanisms, such as education, to remove or reduce the disadvantage. In contrast, *equality of outcome* is a belief that a state can be created where people possess similar material wealth and therefore the economic conditions of their lives are alike. It proposes the eradication of inequalities in wealth, which are perceived to be unjust, by the redistribution of wealth through, for example, progressive taxation.
6. Although some might argue that the party has more committed to ‘labourism’ (ie the dominance of the labour movement) than to democratic socialism.
7. Butskellism is a fusion of the names of Rab Butler, the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Hugh Gaitskell, Labour Chancellor 1950-51 and later Labour Leader. The term refers to the Keynesian consensus between the Conservative and Labour parties in retaining state-owned industries and maintaining a welfare state.
8. Although in his book, “Labour Party Plc”, the journalist David Osler suggests that Labour’s abandonment of the working class began in the Wilson years.
9. Hepple, T., *Ed Milliband: a post-New Labour Leader* (*Politics Review*, Nov 2012).
10. *The Observer*, 4th November 2012, article: *Milibands unite to urge ‘living wage’ for millions.* The ‘living wage’ would be £7.20 per hour, as opposed to the £6.19 per hour national minimum wage.