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Diversity or Solidarity? Making Sense of the “New” Social Democracy

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Received: 8 April 2010; in revised form: 10 May 2010 / Accepted: 19 May 2010 /

Published: 7 June 2010

Abstract: One of the key discussions emerging from within the centre and centre-left of British politics is the means of combining a commitment to diversity with the aim of achieving social solidarity. While there has been a populist strand to this debate recently with the contribution of writers such as Goodhart who has argued that diversity specifically undermines the willingness of the majority (white Anglo-Saxons) to pay for collective welfare provision, there has also been recognition of the difficulty of promoting difference and unity from within even the more sympathetic elements of the academic literature. The purpose of this paper is to consider the nature of this dilemma and to propose a tentative solution. In essence we suggest that the problem lies not in creating a fit between the two elements for the sake of making the ‘new’ social democracy work but in rebuilding traditional social democracy.

Keywords: social democracy; diversity; social solidarity

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to chart the shift that has occurred, arguably across the ‘developed’ world from a broadly social democratic polity, to an economic, social and political environment driven by a combination of, for want of more descriptive terms, neo-Liberal and neo-Conservative ideals. While it would be simplistic and inaccurate to say that social democracy has been displaced, it is evident that politics and economics have been at the least ‘neo-liberalised’ [1] with serious social and environmental consequences. To illustrate this we have elected to refer to the case of New Labour in Britain and their promotion of equal opportunities and diversity.

Even before their election in 1997, New Labour advocated equal opportunities and diversity as issues of strategic importance. However, as we shall argue, they are also individually problematic concepts and, taken together, paradoxical. The problems of equal opportunities are different to those of diversity. The former is a political objective which *might* be achievable in a perfectly functioning free market system, but is definitely *not* obtainable in the current context. Diversity on the other hand is a simple human reality, and exists on different planes and measures [2], although it has become politicised as either an adjunct to [3], or a replacement for, equality of opportunity [4]. Here we maintain that the way in which diversity has been used by New Labour has enabled a reactionary and destructive force to conceal itself in progressive clothing—in this case the sheep is still a sheep to some degree but ultimately it facilitates the justice of the wolf.

Part of our objective is to talk about the enduring themes of social democracy and propose that social democracy can be revived from its current travails but only by employing a traditional form of social justice; underpinned by explicit support for greater social and economic equality. In illustrating the incoherence and inconsistency of the nominal rebranding of social democracy we aim to underline the on-going connection between equality, well-being and justice. A system built on emphasising difference in the hope of equalising opportunities is destined to be divided and unstable.

2. The ‘New’ Social Democracy?

There has been much debate about the response of the centre-left or social democracy to the resurgence of the New Right in the late 1970s, and how this can be understood. Social democracy, or ‘reform liberalism’ in a North American context [5], was widely seen to have failed from this period onwards, economically, politically and socially. While the global circumstances led to similar responses from the centre-left across the western world [1], we are going to use the British example, and the case of New Labour, as a means of constructing our arguments about diversity, justice, solidarity and social democracy.

The passage that led the Labour Party to become New Labour was not as rapid and as revolutionary as many would like to think. In fact it was evolutionary, periodic and the product of comparative policy learning [6] arguably beginning under the leadership of Neil Kinnock and ending with the combined forces of Blair, Brown and Mandelson [1]. In the process many of the central themes of social democracy have been jettisoned. At the heart of this project was the notion of a managed mixed economy, where resources were recognised to be the preserve of the market, with a measure of control provided by the state to apply those resources for the public good. While economic growth was and is accepted almost universally its distribution could not be left to market forces. Competition was not ruled out entirely, but it was generally driven by public ownership, and although efficiency was not

dismissed the over-riding concern was for greater equality [7]. According to some writers equality was never actually pursued that vigorously [8], what really changed from the 1970s onwards has been the expressed belief that it ought to be pursued.

The ‘new social democracy’ advocated by New Labour and echoed in other parts of the industrialised world is inherently individualistic, emphasising freedom rather than equality (though only a very narrow sense of negative freedom [9]) and choice rather than social solidarity. Competition is not about public ownership and management it is about operating in accordance with market forces, with efficiency and productivity as essential drivers and profit as the ultimate end [10]. Any residual attachment to ‘old Labour’ might be conceived of as an attempt to keep traditional constituencies on board, but anything else seems almost incidental:

Although concerned at the rhetorical level with the promotion of social justice, ‘New’ Labour is principally concerned with strengthening the power of capital and allowing competition within the market to structure social reforms by virtue of ‘trickle down’ economics. For critics of the Labour project...Blair’s politics are a rejection of past Labour practice [1].

The political entity that is New Labour has pitched itself as a repackaged, modernised social democracy for a new age. This is widely acknowledged to be either misleading or disingenuous. In the early 1990s the movement away from social democracy had already been recognised, Anderson [11] identified that Labour was accommodating itself to Thatcherism as ‘One Nation’ Conservatives had previously (reluctantly) accepted the post-war settlement. New Labour has been the apex of this accommodation: “We know what the new regime is not; we don’t yet know what it is. Patently, it is not socialist. It is not even social democratic” [12]. New Labour shed its ideological legacy, and in doing so “...Blair was not simply trying to invent a new political language—as Thatcher had—but was consciously trying to put to rest the first hundred years of Labour's history” [13]. Arguably the concealment of their subscription to New Right ideals lay behind various, successive labels such as communitarianism and the Third Way [14]. Ultimately, the Third Way became the ideological cloaking device of choice.

Elsewhere we have critiqued the ‘what works’ philosophy behind Third Way politics [15], but it is important that this trend is continually underlined as set out below. The themes that Blair and colleagues have settled on in place of an explicit ideology need to be comprehensively reviewed in order to ensure that they are not adopted as mere symbols of common sense. In this paper we have chosen to focus, in line with the theme of this special issue, on equality of opportunity and diversity. Of course these are not the political preserve of New Labour, but they have emerged as key concepts for the furtherance of their ‘new social democratic’ agenda.

3. Equal Opportunities *versus* Equality?

From the beginning equality of outcome—here conceived as an economic concept rather than that related to positive discrimination—was dismissed by New Labour in power [16]. Gordon Brown has consistently emphasised this throughout his tenure as Chancellor and latterly as Prime Minister [17]. The championship of opportunity is entirely consistent with the emphasis that has been placed on the market as an engine for socially beneficial outcomes, and, on the State’s role as umpire or facilitator. Some commentators have seen New Labour’s approach as almost entirely biased towards the

supply-side of the economy, prioritising education and employment, and ensuring that people have the opportunities to equip themselves through life-long learning for the flexible labour market that a dynamic market economy requires [7]. Where they have undertaken to challenge demand-side obstacles it has involved reinforcing legislation to overcome discrimination, as well as introducing new measures to expand its coverage (what has been referred to as domain expansion [18]). The Equality Bill 2008 will come fully into force in 2010 and has an agency, The Equality and Human Rights Commission, solely responsible for its monitoring, enforcement and amendment. This may go a long way towards rationalising what was a messy and cumbersome system [19], but the balance between supply and demand is still tilted towards responsabilizing individuals, where people have the right to opportunities, and to remain free of unfair discrimination but they also have a responsibility to take up those opportunities and make the most of them.

The outcome of this has been predictable; numerous reports and studies show that economic inequality has grown since New Labour have been in office. While recognising the complex nature of this issue it is widely acknowledged that the gap between the highest and lowest socio-economic groups has increased [20]. In some ways this is perfectly justifiable from their point of view, because this is again consistent with the promotion of a free market system, yet with the publication of the *New Opportunities* White Paper [21] it is apparent that even the government accepts that opportunities are still too restricted. The justification for concentrating on opportunities, and the motor of equality of opportunity, is that inequality is only acceptable where a person's merit determines their socio-economic position. Leaving aside the issue of what merit means beyond the simplistic equation reconstructed from the work of Michael Young by Saunders [22]—ability plus effort equals merit—the coherence, even the legitimacy, of New Labour's agenda rests on whether social mobility has been facilitated. In short, by their own standards if people have a fair opportunity to succeed then inequality is not a problem.

On this measure though their project can be seriously questioned; it is a selective strategy that overlooks arguably the biggest hurdle to social mobility. It has been apparent that once certain elements of the centre-left lost the economic arguments in the 1970s and 1980s they withdrew into 'identity politics', if social class was beyond their scope then maybe efforts ought to be focused on groups perceived to be disadvantaged [23]. While this has arguably been good for women and black and minority ethnic individuals from already privileged backgrounds it has done very little for the vast majority of those at the bottom of society, regardless of their group identity or affiliation [24].

While New Labour targeted poverty in childhood as one move towards challenging socio-economic disadvantage as a generalised condition, their success has been limited [25]. This should be unsurprising in some ways, as the difficulty of taking 'class' into account in an equal opportunities framework has been acknowledged for some time [26], as to undertake it with any degree of sincerity would of necessity occasion a major restructuring of society. Even on the narrower measure of achieving a meritocracy though, the project appears to have seriously stalled as evidence indicates that social mobility has faltered. For example, the British Medical Association (BMA) have produced a report which shows that while women and black and minority ethnic groups are gaining access to medical schools in significant numbers as a result of governmental investment, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have seen little improvement in their opportunities. Between 2003 and 2008 there has been a growth of just 1.7%, and while 58% of applicants from the most privileged economic groups obtain a place the same is true for only 39% of their worst off counterparts [27]. The

government has spent £392m to improve access to higher education for the poorest since 2001, yet social research has demonstrated that family background and ethnicity continue to play a significant part in determining a person's life chances and that social mobility remains limited [25,28].

A range of barriers have been identified by academics and commentators. For instance, the BMA report argues that the reasons for the underrepresentation of poorer individuals in medical schools are manifold: failures in tertiary education, fears of student-related debt, and lower aspirations [27]. The government in the *New Opportunities* White Paper presented what they see as the problem, a straight reiteration of what they have suggested all along that employment is the way out of poverty. Consequently the White Paper sets out the following remedies:

- A projected £57m to provide free childcare places for disadvantaged families with children below the age of two
- Family nurses for the first two years for 'vulnerable' mothers
- Volunteering programmes for the unemployed
- Employment support for young people coming out of care [21].

However, the common denominator in all this is not exclusion but inequality itself, and while these suggestions hint at it they choose to skirt around it—a process Edelman [29] calls 'misidentification'. To name it would create the possibility of addressing it. New Labour's proposed objective on the other hand is, we would argue, known to be impossible. As Michael Young [30] pointed out in critiquing Blair's usage of 'meritocracy', in order to reach equality of opportunity you need to start from a position of more or less equality. A system which operates on the basis of significant inequalities tied into family-based privilege and inherited advantage, supported by a framework of private education and health, can never produce equality of opportunity. There are too many perverse incentives for people to secure advantages that are undeserved for themselves and for their families.

4. Diversity or Solidarity?

The confusion, whether intentional or otherwise, that surrounds equal opportunities, equality and diversity is profound, as reflected in countless government documents and websites. In fact, as Kandola and colleagues have argued, as a policy solution diversity often works on principles which run counter to equality of opportunity. Furthermore, the linkage of equality with any of the rest borders on wilful misrepresentation [3]. And yet one dimension of the diversity issue is highly relevant for our purposes, which is the constant refrain that has emerged from within New Labour quarters about the inherent value that exists in simply having a diverse population. Echoing the injunctions from countless management sources, the message is that we live in an increasingly interdependent world with vast cultural resources and that if Britain is going to succeed as a global brand we have to exploit our demographic diversity [31-33]. This runs theoretically in parallel with the attention that has been given to 'community cohesion' on the part of the government [34].

Where 'diversity' as a project is concerned there are several questions that have yet to be satisfactorily addressed about what it means, and, what it can produce. If we first look at definitional questions, it is all too apparent that there are a diverse number of interpretations about where the boundaries to diversity should be drawn. Mostly these refer to aspects of group identity, such as 'race', ethnicity or gender. Indeed we would argue that despite the recent episodic domain expansion the

emphasis remains on these two categories in the UK. Sometimes, diversity takes into account cross-national and cross-cultural elements, notably areas of professional practice that stress the need for 'cultural competence' [35], at the extreme it reflects the diversity of individualism, where it can virtually disappear altogether [4]. This obsession with diversity, while to some extent inevitable, and historically important, has undesirable consequences. As Mohan [36,37] has underlined for many years, its vagueness and intrinsic competitive elements serve to deflect attention away from the presence of shared human realities and the commonality of oppression. It is a deliberate device to divide and control.

As for questions about its practical value, there is really very little robust evidence about the impact of diversity on business outcomes. Grand claims are sometimes made about the benefits of having a diverse workforce (where diversity is principally assumed to be about gender and 'race' and ethnicity); for example, recently an article was headed 'The business case is no longer in question' [38]. Nevertheless, most of these claims seem to be based on assumption and assertion. Assumptions or assertions that diversity will create role models, facilitate trust in diverse communities, even promote greater sensitivity to a diverse range of needs and interests [4,39-41]. However, when we inspect the basis for these claims, we find either associations between diverse leadership and profit margins in a selected time period [42] (and just as frequently comparable research that finds no association [35]), or, surveys reporting the perceptions of employee groups—mainly Human Resources managers/workers [43]. Associations in short time periods could be coincidental, and the perceptions of people with a vested interest in the result—and probably little knowledge about bottom-line impact—do not constitute convincing evidence. At this stage it is probably safer to echo the conclusions of Bates [44] and maintain that there is as yet no link between diversity in the workforce or leadership levels and any implications for the bottom-line.

Where diversity has potential to make an impact lies in the intersection between theory and practice and this is where the thinly veiled New Right tendencies of New Labour have created a significant problem. The advocacy of the Third Way, as set out above, has led to the concealment of political principles and ideological tenets. As we have argued elsewhere [15] this has enabled the New Racism identified in the early 1980s [45] to gain credibility amongst self professed political 'liberals'. Problems of 'race relations' are not now about racism or systemic biases for many commentators, they are more properly about the proximity of difference. Put simply the scientific racism that had developed as a means of justifying slavery, colonisation and imperialism was discredited in the 1950s by the conclusions of UNESCO, and so another justification had to be found. The construct built by individuals like Enoch Powell replaced biological superiority/inferiority with the 'problematizing' of cultural difference.

Goodhart [46] is arguably the most prominent of current writers in this tradition. He maintained that diversity forms one half of what he called the 'progressive dilemma'. In many ways it was more or less a restatement of New Racism with a fresh twist. The dilemma exists around the paradoxical nature of diversity in the context of a desire to achieve social solidarity. New Labour have, as with all 'new' social democratic parties, sought to combine community cohesion with a celebration of diversity. From Goodhart's point of view this is the political equivalent of having your cake and trying to eat it—diversity by definition jeopardises social solidarity. Where his account is different to predecessors though is his attempt to support his claims with more specific evidence than simply referring to problematic 'race relations'.

At the centre of the progressive dilemma lies the future of socialised (*not* socialist) welfare in Britain. In order for a state welfare system to function, so his argument runs, people need to have empathy, part of which requires a shared set of cultural values and norms. When a society becomes less alike it creates the space for division and a loss of empathy, and more particularly begins to erode the willingness to pay for collective welfare provision. In justifying these claims Goodhart turns to international comparison for support—the United States is referred to as a case similar to that of Britain and Sweden is held out as ‘proof’ that diversity will attack even the most solidaristic communities. The evidence for Goodhart is clear: diversity leads to the destruction of community cohesion and aggregated welfare. The answer to these problems is to create a shared collective identity by forcing settlers to subscribe to British cultural values and stronger citizenship processes.

Elsewhere we have taken Goodhart to task on a number of grounds, mainly on the basis of his hidden assumptions and his use of evidence [15]. First, with respect to culture, he does not provide a convincing definition of British culture that incomers should imbibe. What is British culture? Who has the authority to set out definitive guidance on this? Surely culture is localised as much as it is nationally articulated? Is culture a static entity that can easily be transmitted? He also fails to make any link between diversity and loss of support for social welfare. Might the marketisation of welfare not just as easily explain any perceived erosion of support, if there is any discernible loss? He also employs international data in a way that ignores conflicting evidence. Can the US and Sweden really tell us anything definitive about the British case?

Having said all this there has been evidence for some time questioning the implicit acceptance that diversity is a positive thing. Cook [47] talked about the negative impact of diversity in work settings, where the proximity of different people in work teams led to lower performance and more hostility. There has also been more systematic evidence at a macro level. The research of Putnam [48], carried out across different countries with very different political and welfare traditions, indicates that diversity and ‘community’ as ideals can indeed run into conflict. Asked whether they trusted their neighbours only 30% of people from culturally diverse San Francisco said they would ‘a lot’. In South Dakota, where the population is far less diverse, the response was 80%. Putnam suggests that what happens in more diverse areas is that people withdraw from each other altogether, and that this occurs despite common social and economic circumstances.

Research into these issues in a British context indicates that although people do express preferences for people ‘like them’ and an absence of trust in neighbours unlike themselves, in practice they have as much to do with ‘different’ neighbours as they do with people classed as ‘their own’. In short, people say one thing and do something completely different [49]. At the heart of arguments about diversity is the issue of trust, what Goodhart is talking about when he sees a decline in the willingness to pay for collective welfare (if indeed that is what is happening) is an erosion of trust. But trust is only a variable in a more complex equation, we would argue that diversity is not responsible for a loss of trust, it is inequality:

Economic deprivation, not ethnic diversity, is what erodes social cohesion...Trust is also a legacy of history. Where people from diverse backgrounds do become involved in institutions, contradictory histories may hamper their efforts to work together [50].

Diversity and cohesion are compatible but only in a society of more or less equals, to quote Ridley [51]: ‘...social and material exchange between equals...is the raw material of trust, and trust is the foundation of virtue’.

We maintain here that New Labour is not a social democratic party, that in advocating inequality and the private acquisition of wealth through market relations it has become a component of centre-right heterodoxy with some residual elements of old Labour retained for the sake of expediency. Under the cloak of common sense ‘Third Way’ political language, the usage of concepts like equal opportunities and diversity is either seriously confused or is a calculated attempt to mislead [29]. Choice and diversity are issues that have slipped recently and this requires some attention if society is to be both cohesive and representative.

5. Social Democracy and Political Diversity: A Working Framework

One area of choice that has been seriously circumscribed is in the political sphere. As Heffernan [1] has claimed, politics in Britain has shifted towards the political median, the two extremes of left and right have almost been raised making the bulk of political parties slide onto a middle ground that has increasingly congregated towards the centre-right. There is little diversity at present, as other parties with different programmes have little hope in gaining office. At the moment it seems possible that New Labour will hand power back to the Conservatives at the next election [52]. This is seemingly due to the reliable voting base established by Thatcher changing hands rather than any radical shift in the political landscape [1].

If this pattern is to change Labour have to return to traditional ground forging a social democracy that is more in keeping with traditional values. However, what is required to make this work is essential honesty, because without it, politics and politicians will continue to be subject to suspicion and skepticism [53]. One way in which this could be achieved in the very short term is to be truthful about ideological commitments—setting aside the Third Way because while it might be flexible it is also deeply confusing and ultimately dishonest. If Labour insists on being a party for capital and profit at the expense of the majority of its citizens then at least it should be brave enough to state that and give up all pretence of being a social democratic party.

There is a model available that Labour could follow should it choose to return to its roots, and it resides in what we have referred to elsewhere as Western European Social Policy Analysis (WESPA) [54]. As a field of scholarly enquiry WESPA encompasses a wide range of concerns, inter-disciplinary foci, and normative perspectives. Yet the enduring influence of collectivist values in Western Europe, its robust tradition of labour movement activism and involvement in policy making, and the persistence of substantial welfare states have meant that social democracy as a system of ideas has occupied a pivotal position in the discipline [55,56]. This means that social democratic aims and values have exercised a defining influence over the discourses that constitute WESPA. This influence has been so pervasive that even those scholars whose work is influenced by the liberal tradition of political philosophy have found it necessary to take issue with the themes and insights, principles and policy prescriptions of social democracy [57,58]. This intellectual tradition is premised on three foundational assumptions.

The first concerns the social conditions that are required to maximise human well-being. Liberals insist that liberty is integral to welfare, because it gives individuals the opportunity to define and pursue their conception of the good life [58]. But social democrats maintain that human agents are

driven primarily by the need for affective integration, or psychic engagement with societal norms and values. Social solidarity may be “equated with the concept and consciousness of ‘who is my neighbour?’”. It is a desirable sensation, for man [sic] is happiest when most integrated in a group” [59]. Social democrats insist that welfare is maximised where the normative repertoire of social cohesion gives priority to ‘social equality’, which may be thought of as a relational normative ideal. What matters is that *all* individuals are regarded as having equal standing in their communities, regardless of differentials in access to material assets. But when they are left unchecked, income inequalities may become so intense that they give rise to a hierarchy of “large scale cumulative inequalities of advantage”, making it “difficult for people to live together, even if politically they are defined as equals” [60]. If social solidarity is to be preserved, the scope of income differentials should be circumscribed by the public authority.

Social democracy’s second foundational assumption concerns the role and impact of the market with regard to welfare. To a greater or lesser extent, liberals are confident that the market gives individuals the freedom to develop and deploy the capacities that are essential to their conception of the good life [61]. But for social democrats, the market is incompatible with the attainment of appropriate forms of solidarity, because unfettered markets intensify economic inequalities, creating enormous disparities in well-being and life-chances. The affluent and the least advantaged “do not have a sense of shared fate”. Each group “...looks out for its own interests and is likely to see the demands of the other as conflicting with their own well-being. Society is seen as a zero-sum game between conflicting groups” [62] making solidarity more difficult to attain. Poorly regulated markets are notoriously volatile, diminishing the degree to which agents are able to exercise control over their own futures. Yet solidarity depends upon a sense of personal efficacy and optimism about the future. And the market gives rise to stigma, the inevitable consequence of being regarded by society and its welfare institutions as a second class citizen. Negative selection is a salient characteristic of privately administered welfare programmes, because it would run against the profit motive not to exclude people unable to pay, just as it would to include those who are likely to be excessively demanding. But this exclusion is almost certain to leave the least advantaged with a bitter taste in their mouths [59]. In sum, a reliance on markets to allocate resources intensifies income inequalities, which undermine social cohesion, first by diminishing the affective bonds that tie people together, and second by isolating the least advantaged from the social mainstream.

Social democracy’s third foundational assumption concerns the appropriate role and scope of the public authority. Liberals insist that public action can only be justified where it is necessary to ensure that all individuals are able to pursue their conception of the good life [57]. But social democrats embrace a paternalist notion of the role of the state, subordinating individualised, negative freedom to their conception of the good. As far as social policy is concerned, selective social services and income transfers give rise to stigma, reinforcing the social isolation of the least advantaged. Where the public authority is serious about sustaining social cohesion, it will rely on universal social services and income transfers because they are inclusive, treat all beneficiaries in an equivalent way, have considerable popular legitimacy, and confer greater security [62,63].

We suggest that rather than claim to have reconfigured social democracy, using off-the-shelf labels such as the Third Way, and harnessing concepts like equality of opportunity and diversity to fuel it, that the UK New Labour government (should it continue to *be* the government after the election later this year) needs to return to the three foundational assumptions of true social democracy. Further, that it

needs to reintroduce the language of equality to political debate, particularly if it wants to create the basis for a stable and cohesive society. Without genuine efforts in this direction we believe that the evident lack of faith the wider general public have in politicians *per se* will continue to increase.

6. Conclusion

Since the arrival of New Labour in 1997 the political landscape of the UK has provided significant material for social scientific speculation about its nature and ultimate aims. Writers like Anthony Giddens have argued that what we have seen has been a recasting of social democracy for the twenty-first century. We support a different interpretation, that the Third Way amounts to little more than a combination of neo-Liberal economic policies and Social Conservatism hidden beneath appeals to ‘common sense’ and commitments to ‘what works’.

A central feature of this agenda has been to focus on issues of equality of opportunity and diversity in order to justify social and economic inequality. ‘If only the UK could be at peace with its diversity and maximise opportunities it would reap the rewards in terms of the general welfare’ is the current refrain. The tension between unity and diversity has been recognised if misconceived, but New Labour appears either unable or unwilling to address it, preferring the path of misidentification [29]. Our contention is that the cause of much social unrest and dissatisfaction is due to growing inequality, and that the only way to promote well-being and social solidarity is through a return to the foundational principles of social solidarity driven by a sincere regard for greater social and economic equality.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the reviewers of this paper, and the scholars both within academia and without who struggle daily to see beneath the surface.

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