



A retrospective on The Blair Revolution

Setting out to build on the past, rather than destroy what previous governments did, this political tract highlights both New Labour's accomplishments and its systematic shortcomings

Roger Liddle on *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?* (1996)

The Blair Revolution was published in early 1996, mere months before New Labour's astonishing landslide victory in the May 1997 general election. The book was conceived to attain two entwined goals in order to prepare New Labour for government. First, it sought to create a new intellectual identity for New Labour, one which drew on Labour's rich history of revisionism but also illustrated how the party had irrevocably evolved since it plumbed the depths of internal crisis in the 1980s by outlining the political principles and style of leadership that would characterise the prospective Blair government. Second, it attempted to convey a sense of New Labour's policy agenda for reforming Britain, not least in terms of our economic priorities, efforts to rebuild a spirit of society and community, plans for constitutional reform and commitment to pro-Europeanism.

But I would hesitate to describe it as a "classic" of social democratic thought. We – the authors, Peter Mandelson and I – saw ourselves as thoughtful political practitioners, not theoretical thinkers. The book's model was, therefore, not Anthony Crosland's *Future of Socialism*; rather, we hoped to match the model of a quality political tract, much like Roy Jenkins' *Why Vote Labour* in 1959.

However, in many respects, the book's political credence was ambiguous, perhaps typically so for how New Labour conducted itself. It certainly was not an official statement of party policy, yet because Peter Mandelson was the book's principal author, famed for his closeness to Tony Blair, its arguments were deemed to be very influential. The ambiguity of the whole exercise was summed up for me in two episodes: Tony Blair personally dictating to Peter over the telephone what he wanted us to say in the opening paragraphs; and then Tony's failure to show up at the book's launch party, because of fears that too close an association with it might be damaging to him.

Given the book's prominence, one of its most surprising features was how it came to be co-authored by us. For Peter it was an important stage in his unnecessarily long and painful development from Britain's first ever "spin doctor" to his pivotal role as first secretary of state and lord president of the council in Gordon Brown's government; or, to phrase it in the language of contemporary political gossip, an essential part of his transition from Blair's clandestine "Bobby" in his leadership campaign to emerging as serious political player in his own right, one with a indisputable claim on high ministerial office in the prospective Labour government. The book also gave Peter the opportunity to inject some ideological substance into the New Labour project to supplement the more public relations-orientated reforms he had overseen in various guises since first becoming the party's director of communications under Neil Kinnock in 1985.

Yet, while Peter's friends understood this rationale for him writing the book, they were somewhat taken aback by his choice of me as co-author. We both had Labour in our genes – but in the political mythology of the 1980s I had been an "SDP traitor". Peter, of course, had remained in the party. Nonetheless, the late 1970s and early 1980s had been mutually traumatic: we both felt that the party we had grown up in was being destroyed; we both shared a deep commitment to the trade unions but the Winter of Discontent left us both feeling badly let down by their political manoeuvring; we both hated what the Hard Left was doing to Labour; and, as local councillors in Ted Knight's Lambeth, we both witnessed at first hand the damage he inflicted on the party. I had as deep a sense as Peter of the emotional and ideological journey Labour had undertaken to present itself once again as a credible party of government but it was still characteristically bold for him to want to write the book with me.

Many people at the time presumed he had done this because I would draft the manuscript and he would simply amend and sign it off. This, however, was not our working method. Peter drafted a third of the book – including the chapters on Blair as a leader; the importance of British-EU relations; and New Labour’s governing strategy – and we jointly co-authored a further fifth of the text, while I focused on the socio-economic content. We then swapped drafts and did revisions of each other’s work. At proof stage we spent a whole three days going through every chapter, reading it aloud and amending any phrases that could conceivably be subjected to media distortion – this was an example of the Mandelson thoroughness I would witness on many occasions in subsequent years.

The Blair Revolution did not say everything I wanted it to but, at the same time, it did not say anything to which I objected. Inevitably, given the context in which it was written – a general election in prospect and Peter’s presumed influence on the manifesto, the book was an amalgam of intellectually sound and politically feasible arguments. As a result, the book was not sufficiently specific about the future of public services, an independence of the Bank of England, the putative architecture of financial regulation, and the euro, as well as our political and constitutional reform programmes. Yet, in many respects, this was not the book’s purpose; instead, it set out a framework for the governing principles and political goals of Blair’s new, modern social democratic party and distinguished them from those of past Labour governments.

Nevertheless, the difficulties and anxieties we encountered in the process of writing the book were instructive of the some of New Labour’s systemic shortcomings. My initial draft of the section on public service reform was, for instance, gutted after it was deemed to present the party with as yet unpalatable choices *vis-à-vis* the means of pursuing reform – we were to waste a great deal of time in our first term before some of these truths were acknowledged. Unsurprisingly, Gordon Brown did not want Peter Mandelson pre-empting his decision to make the Bank of England independent. More surprisingly, the issue that most exercised Tony Blair was our specific commitment to fiscal funding of mainstream political parties; he thought the prospect of higher taxes for politics could be immensely damaging to Labour. The shame is that he held to that view very strongly in government with ultimately disastrous consequences for both his premiership and personal reputation as a result of the (unfounded) allegations of the “cash for honours” crisis.

However, when I look back at New Labour’s record in government I believe *The Blair Revolution* was a pretty fair forecast of our political priorities, central policy reforms and governing strategy. Indeed, as the second paragraph of the book intimates: “New Labour has set itself a bold task: to modernise Britain socially, economically and politically. In doing so it aims to build on Britain’s strengths. Its mission is to create not destroy. Its strategy is to move forward from where Margaret Thatcher left off, rather than to dismantle every single thing she did.”

This is indeed what New Labour accomplished; as a political movement, it accepted that successful governments built on the cumulative foundations of those which precede them and, as such, a large and significant section of the Thatcherite settlement we inherited in office was incorporated into our framework for governance. Thus, until the global financial crisis of the current juncture, Labour stuck with the Tory reforms to industrial relations, privatisation, and secured the ceiling on top tax rates. At the same time, however, New Labour adamantly rejected the Thatcherite conceit that society no longer existed. Today, the National Health Service is a resurrected goliath of universal high quality healthcare; educational standards and opportunities have radically increased; higher education and research received unprecedented investment; cities and regions were rebuilt from the embers of Thatcherite destruction; abhorrent levels of child poverty have been alleviated; and our society is more tolerant, open, free, fair and liberal than before.

But, of course, we should have achieved more and made far too many mistakes – some of those were evident in the omissions and evasions of *The Blair Revolution*. We were over-complacent about Britain's economic strengths, not least in unbridled over-reliance on the financial services sector, and the long-term damage Thatcherism inflicted on the country's productive and manufacturing base has left the British economy looking dangerously unbalanced. We thought we could narrow inequality by focusing our efforts on poverty: it is now clear that the global forces driving inequality are much more powerful and that the 1980s and 1990s mantras of labour market flexibility will have to change. We also did not have a clear enough conception of the balance to be struck between centralism and localism, state provision and third sector innovation.

This requires a new process of revisionism, one which learns from New Labour's mistakes, builds upon its many successes and prepares us once again for government.

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