Liberalism rediscovered
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Should Tony Blair be seen as a mere consolidator of the Thatcher revolution, or as a revolutionary in his own right? We asked Samuel Beer—for many years, America's foremost scholar of British politics—to judge*

"DIVISION among radicals almost 100 years ago", Tony Blair told the Labour Party last year, "resulted in a 20th century dominated by Conservatives. I want the 21st century to be the century of the radicals." This statement demands careful consideration.

What happened in 1899 was that the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which had been acting as a pressure group in "the interests of labour", voted to set up a separate political party. At first called the Labour Representation Committee, the new organisation in 1906 took the name Labour Party. Today the leader of the Labour Party is telling us that the founding of the Labour Party was a great mistake and that he looks forward to reversing that fatal deviation.

Nor does it misrepresent his views to say that this reversal is made even more urgent by a further damaging division in the forces of radicalism dating from 1918. Until then the infant Labour Party had been the junior partner of the Liberals, helping them to win their landslide victory of 1906 and to enact a sweeping programme of social and constitutional reform in great part inspired and led by Lloyd George. The decisive break did not come until 1918 when Labour committed itself to socialism.

Tony Blair's history is sound. Division on the left has done much to keep the right in power. That view of history also clarifies and magnifies Blair's achievement in returning Labour to its roots in a radical liberalism. The achievement owes a good deal to the defeats suffered by old Labour at the hands of a Conservative Party which at the same time was also undergoing a profound ideological purge under Margaret Thatcher. Does the resulting bipartisan embrace of the free market make Blair a clone of Thatcher? Or does his adaptation of the liberal tradition offer Britain the clear choice which his towering electoral victory would seem to give him the power to execute?
Socialism as blind alley

To appreciate what Blair has brought forth, one must make the effort to recall Labour’s age of faith. That term with its religious overtones is no exaggeration. The party’s ideology was at once a damming analysis of capitalist society as a whole and a utopian vision of the Socialist Commonwealth. Common ownership, which in practice came to mean nationalisation, was the key concept, since, as spokesmen for the cause had long preached, this change in economic structure would bring about the cultural transformation of capitalistic self-interest into socialist fellowship.

That ideology continued to flourish in the party right through the first years of the Labour government of 1945. It was sincerely believed, for instance, that once the coal mines had been transferred from private to public ownership under the flag of the National Coal Board, ancient strife between managers and miners would cease. As late as 1946, as sensible a man as Clement Attlee, then prime minister, could declare that “the distinctive side of Labour’s programme” is “our socialist policy, the policy of nationalisation.”

When that policy failed as an instrument of economic control, a revision of socialist doctrine became urgent. Its essence was to drop common ownership as the means of achieving economic equality. Instead that traditional aim was to be reached by the redistributive spending of the expanding welfare state. The unions played a decisive role, first by assuring the new doctrine’s acceptance within the party and then by destroying any chance of its success as economic policy.

I recall how at the party conference of 1953, trade-union power crushed the effort to commit the party to further nationalisation. The key figure was Arthur Deakin, who as general secretary of the transport workers faithfully administered from a tiny office for a minuscule salary the affairs of his vast organisation. When the critical vote loomed at the conference, he took the floor, denounced the resolution as “meaningless mumbo-jumbo” or, to be more exact, “the worst abortion ever conceived by the mind of man,” and cast against it the 835,000 votes of his union, a figure not far short of the total cast by all individual members of the constituency parties.

In the late 1960s the Wilson government, desperately trying to control the effect of wage increases on inflation, which the new policy of spending had encouraged, sought to win the unions’ acceptance of pay restraint. The unions were unwilling and/or unable to co-operate. The TUC exercised a veto which was accepted by the cabinet. The subsequent “self-defeating bonanzas” of the wage scramble finally produced the winter of discontent of 1978-79 which brought Thatcher to power. The pursuit of socialist equality by spending had proved as fruitless as by common ownership.

The demise of Tory paternalism

“I think of myself”, Margaret Thatcher has said, “as a Liberal in the 19th century sense—like Gladstone.” Her fiscal prudence would have won the approval of Gladstone, who liked to see “money fructify in the pockets of the taxpayer.” Historically speaking, her repudiation of the Tory element in the Conservative heritage is even more far-reaching than Mr Blair’s repudiation of socialism. Her ideological ancestry excludes Harold Macmillan, Rab Butler, Neville Chamberlain, Stanley Baldwin, Disraeli and Bolingbroke.

What the Conservatives did with their landslide victory of 1931 exemplifies that older strain of Tory statism. The National Government, which in all but name was a Conservative administration, was the agent of a reassertion of state power which not only broke with the free-trade policy of the previous hundred years, but also laid the foundations of the managed economy with its corporatist structure which the bipartisan consensus established after 1945. When one looks at the instruments of economic control utilised in that system, one continually comes across the
contributions of pre-war Conservatism, such as a managed currency, import quotas, subsidies, controls on the location of industry, and those first initiatives in nationalisation, the BBC, the London Passenger Transport Board and the Central Electricity Board.

While Tory statism was mainly directed toward control of the economy, it also embraced a concern for “the condition of the people”. Making and keeping the party electable was one cause of the occasional appearance of this concern, but it was not the only cause. Mr Attlee, who was not unduly disposed to give Tories the credit for good intentions, admitted as much.

Margaret Thatcher proclaimed and practised a Gladstonian liberalism. Tony Blair is returning his party to the liberalism of Lloyd George. And there is another party, led by Paddy Ashdown, which actually puts the term Liberal in its title. It would be no surprise if British voters were to conclude “We are all liberals now.” Tony Benn, doyen of old socialism, says as much when he contemptuously refers to the present party alignment as “a coalition”.

As a result, however, British politics has lost something important. With Blair’s purge of socialism supplementing Thatcher’s demotion of Tory paternalism, two distinctive elements have disappeared from the political culture. Both Toryism and socialism brought sentiments and values from a distant past into contemporary politics. The Tory tradition showed traces of the deference and noblesse oblige of pre-modern hierarchy. Likewise the sense of solidarity among socialists drew on the values of an older organic society. It makes sense, therefore, to use the term “modernisation”, much fancied by Tony Blair, to describe the disappearance of these vestiges of a more traditional society.

Britain, however, has not taken leave of the collectivist age which it entered while these sentiments still had force. Tony Blair confronts a huge public sector. Mrs Thatcher’s assaults on nationalisation and the privileged position of organised labour were immensely successful in preparing the way for New Labour. From a financial point of view, however, the welfare state has survived more than a decade of Conservative hostility virtually intact.

In Britain no more than in America has the era of big government come to an end, although Tony Blair said it had in 1995 and Bill Clinton, using similar words, told Congress the same a few months later. Not only are their speech-writers in touch. The two chief executives face a similar predicament. The management of these huge public sectors cannot be left to the ad hoc responses of pressure politics. There must be some clear defining purpose, some concept of the common good, which will impose direction and control on the unruly pluralism of these modern, democratic, capitalistic welfare states. Is Tony Blair’s liberalism up to that formidable task?

Two conceptions of liberty

Considering this, my thoughts turn back to a dinner I attended in 1954 with virtually the whole of the Parliamentary Liberal Party. Reduced to a mere six MPs and supported by only 2.6% of the voters, the Liberals and their cause were, according to all expert opinion, destined for extinction. Yet the senior at the table, Sir Rhys Hopkin-Morris, stated his political creed with clarity and conviction.

“No one”, he said, “is to tell anyone else what is good for him.” He rejected the claim to such authority, whether asserted on “the aristocratic principle” or on behalf of “the community”. In the economy, as in matters of opinion, individual freedom must also prevail. When some farmers in his constituency had recently asked him if he supported “guaranteed prices”, he replied that the concept was a contradiction in terms. “You can have a guarantee, or a price, but not both.” When my host, Jo Grimond, reminded him that Adam Smith himself had thought that government should provide roads, bridges, docks and the like, Sir Rhys conceded that in some respects the father of
laisser-faire was a bit too interventionist.

So nourished on what I called in my notes at the time “the pure milk of Gladstonian liberalism”, Sir Rhys cogently identified 1906 as the moment when the Liberal party had deserted the old faith. He could bear no mention of Lloyd George and his social reforms. What was on his mind is made vividly clear when one reviews how radically the direction of policy had been changed by the new social liberalism brought to power by the famous landslide of 1906: protection of trade union funds, an eight-hour day for miners, minimum wages, labour exchanges, old age pensions and health and unemployment insurance, heavy taxation of the well to do, all rudely capped by the emasculation of the aristocratic veto in 1911. Then and there Lloyd George laid the foundations of the welfare state on which Labour later built a larger structure, according to the architecture of those two social liberals, Beveridge and Keynes.

Informing the conflict between the two branches of liberalism, as recalled by Sir Rhys, are two concepts of liberty which in modern times have received a good deal of attention from philosophers and have had considerable influence on government and politics. One side puts great stress on the rights of the individual, holding in the language of a recent editorial in *The Economist* that “men and women are entitled to live their lives as they choose, according to their own idea of what is good, provided their choices do not harm others.” Support for this principle can be found among great thinkers—Locke, Kant, Mill. It can be used to identify the general drift of policies, such as Margaret Thatcher’s effort to restrict government interference with the free market. The idea has had exhilarating effects in breaking down archaic taboos; it also has the weakness of fostering a moral relativism which loosens social bonds and undermines the capacity for self-government.

The other concept of liberty is also individualist, but holds that individuals need and seek close ties with others, as they take part in deciding on and enjoying a common life with them. A better description of the powerful bonds of mutual identification which we actually find among people, this approach has the weakness of tending toward an oppressive moral absolutism.

Moral relativism is not a weakness of Tony Blair. “I tell you”, he said to the party conference, “a decent society is not based on rights. It is based on duty. Our duty to each other.” Blair states the defining purpose of that society in a vivid oxymoron, “compassion with a hard edge”. What he means is sharply expressed in his warning to young people not to lapse into dependency but to work to improve their skills, to avoid crime, sloth and disorderly conduct. Both the compassion and the hard edge appear in his pledge to end not only the Britain where children go hungry, but also the Britain where “gangs of teenagers hang around street corners, nothing to do, but spit and abuse passers-by.”

Blair does not hold out the socialist promise of equality of condition, but the liberal promise of equality of opportunity. To offer opportunity is to require a responsible use of that opportunity. And in Blair’s view that means not for just any purpose one may choose, but for the purpose of making Britain, if no longer “the mightiest”, now and in future “the best place to lead a fulfilled life”. Neither of the two leading British philosophers of social liberalism, T.H. Green and L.T. Hobhouse, has stated more earnestly the ideal of a society in which individuals find fulfillment in a common good.

### Populism and nationalism

Some critics call this hard edge of Blair’s message social conservatism. That does not fit. Blair is not speaking as the voice of privilege talking down to lesser folk. He claims to speak for The People. That claim has a basis in present fact and draws on an old and honoured usage. It is emphatically meant to be inclusive, and certainly not confined to “the working class”. Blair’s
doctrine of responsibility gets a warm response from all classes. His approval ratings have been phenomenal and, when it comes to voting, he has demonstrated a strong trans-class appeal. According to a recent MORI survey, the percentage shift of opinion to Labour between the elections of 1992 and 1997 was almost exactly the same in each of the social classes surveyed.

Blair’s populism, as rhetoric and philosophy, descends from England’s failed democratic revolution of the 17th century. As in the famed Agreement of the People of 1647, it is an appeal to an authority beyond king and parliament, to a body of individuals perceived as sufficiently responsible and united to be the ultimate sovereign. These sentiments, while never dead, were revived in the late 19th century as radical democrats moved up in the Liberal Party. Lloyd George became their acclaimed champion fighting his fiercest battles for “The People’s Budget” and against the peers by appealing beyond parliament to “the great assize of the People.”

And which people? The British people, the British nation. In Blair’s lexicon, the terms are synonymous. Strongly as he supports Scottish devolution, Blair’s British nationalism is as fundamental as his populism. In Tony Blair’s view of the world, the British nation-state is alive and well, and on its way to becoming “a beacon for good at home and abroad”—which includes a leading role in the European community. If the term were not so unpopular, I would call his doctrine a New Nationalism.

The dangers

Mr Blair’s populist rhetoric has consequences. He not only claims the authority of the people for his reforms; he also proposes new institutions through which they can exercise that authority more effectively. He is an ardent champion of constitutional reforms, nearly all of which would increase popular participation.

I heartily agree with the pledge to reform what the prime minister has called “the most centralised government of any large state in the western world”. But when, in the light of American experience, I review the programme of constitutional reform which is widely advocated in Britain today—a written constitution, a bill of rights, judicial review, an elected second chamber, decentralisation and devolution, freedom of information, proportional representation and a fixed term for parliament—I shudder. The United States has tried them all, and as a result enjoys a confusion of voices in our political discourse which often threatens to deprive the ship of state of any sense of direction.

A truism makes the point: representative government must not only represent, it must also govern. Constitutional reform should be fitted to the need for coherence and effectiveness in enacting and administering policy. Mr Blair must not carry these constitutional reforms so far as to destroy that concentration of constitutional and political power which would enable him to reshape the welfare state. And which must surely be the envy of Bill Clinton, locked in the embrace of a system so responsive to the demands of the public that sometimes it is hardly able to move. The prime minister should bear in mind that Lloyd George launched his reform of the Lords not as an end in itself but to clear the way for his revolutionary financial and social measures.

Tony Blair’s New Labour offers the nation a choice. His social liberalism, exemplified in British history and honoured in the classics of political thought, distinguishes his views sharply enough from other brands of liberalism to sustain a lively and significant democratic dialogue. His emphasis upon the responsibilities entailed by the opportunities to be opened up by New Labour promises to give a defining purpose to the remodelled welfare state.

Some critics doubt that he can deliver on the promise. His immense popularity is a source of weakness as well as strength. While differences of economic class will remain in the New Britain,
as in any society with considerable equality of opportunity, the old class system with its pre-
modern solidarities, Tory and socialist, is fading. This loss deprives the political parties of that
unwavering support which surveys of the electorate found throughout the 1950s and 1960s. As in
last year's election, today's more volatile electorate will be more likely to vote for the leader than
the party.

Tony Blair is a formidable vote-getter. But, again reflecting on American experience, can a chief
executive dependent on such a volatile constituency deflect the pressures against the hard edges
of his policies? Judging by what Tony Blair has said and done, I am betting he has what it takes.

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sometime speechwriter (for FDR), he traces his interest in politics to a meeting with Warren Harding in 1921.

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