

Labour Vanishes

Ross McKibbin (May 2015)

(From LRB)

You are invited to read this free essay from the *London Review of Books*. [Subscribe now](#) to access every article from every fortnightly issue of the *London Review of Books*, including the entire LRB archive of over 13,500 essays and reviews.

The Labour Party may be the largest party after the next election, and it may even secure a majority, but it could also do very badly. These alternatives show Labour's decline since the first couple of years of the coalition, when a Labour victory in 2015 was (more or less) confidently predicted. The change is reflected in the party's mood: in the nerviness, the timidity and the stress-induced gaffes. Ed Miliband has lost authority as he has lost the courage of his convictions. It's clear that he never had the political self-confidence to impose his authority on the neo-Blairites who surround him. Nonetheless, Labour's problems aren't all the doing of the leadership. Equally responsible are the external circumstances that are in the process of reshaping the British political system.

Of these the structural collapse of the British state has probably been the most important. The crisis, long evolving, has come to a head faster than expected as a result of the Scottish independence referendum and David Cameron's political ambition. Labour has (or had) an electoral interest in keeping Scotland in the Union. The Conservatives do not. Their loyalty to the United Kingdom is sentimental, not electoral. The practical argument against Scottish independence was that it wouldn't be in Scotland's economic or cultural interest, and that remains true whatever the SNP says. But once Scotland was offered devo-max, the Conservative Party's sentimental reasons for preserving the status quo no longer applied: this was a chance they could seize. The speed with which the Tories have set about writing legislation that would enshrine 'English' votes for 'English' measures in the Commons, though outrageous, is not surprising. The result, so the Tories hope, would be an England permanently governed by the Conservative Party in a House of Commons elected on an unreformed voting system. There are, however, formidable hurdles for the party to overcome. The criteria for judging whether legislation is 'English' or not still haven't been seriously addressed, and it will probably turn out that 'English' legislation is a much smaller proportion of the whole than people think. Would Scottish MPs, to take one example, be excluded from voting on legislation which, though apparently English, could be thought harmful to Scottish interests? In any case, the idea of 'English' votes for 'English' measures exaggerates the social and economic homogeneity of England – the North of England has more in common with Scotland than with the Home Counties. Besides, the creation of a Parliament where some MPs can't vote on much of the legislation that comes before it turns those MPs, as Gordon Brown has pointed out, into second-class citizens. It would also effectively end the Union – a paradoxical result of a referendum that supposedly preserved it. The Labour Party's structure and loyalties were a product of the United Kingdom and its decline has left the party almost rudderless.

The crisis of the United Kingdom has coincided with, and is related to, the crisis in our relationship with the EU, which is now as much part of the structure of the British state as the Union with Scotland once was. But our membership deeply divides the Conservatives. Unfortunately Cameron is a partisan opportunist whose idea of the long term is tomorrow's *Daily Mail* headline, and who, unlike John Major in similar circumstances, is seemingly prepared to do almost anything to retain his leadership. In his attempts to contain Ukip he has already given a number of hostages to fortune. He has promised a referendum on EU membership – on Ukip's terms. He now insists that the EU must permit Britain to limit immigration from the EU ('a game changer') and has implied that if the EU refuses, which it will, he will support British withdrawal in the 2017 referendum. The ennoblement of Andrew Green, the founder of the pressure group MigrationWatch, shows how far Cameron will go. It's possible that by the end of 2017 the United Kingdom will, in effect, have disappeared and that Britain will have left the EU. What the Labour Party would or should do then is anyone's guess. It will, of course, oppose Britain's leaving the EU. But its policies will even so be partly determined by a power struggle within the Tory Party whose outcome is uncertain.

Anyone wishing to chart the fragmentation of the party system and the origins of Labour's predicament could start in 1951. In that year's election 97 per cent of the electorate voted either Labour or Conservative: 49 per cent Labour and 48 per cent Conservative (the Conservatives won 48.6 per cent of the vote in Scotland). That result completed a process begun in the 1930s: the transformation of Britain into a two-party state, Labour and anti-Labour, which meant Conservative. The two parties appealed to brute social loyalties and antagonisms solidified in the 1940s. Harold Nicolson, who didn't like what had happened, described them in 1951 as 'two Nations facing each other like two blocks of cement'. The cement has now crumbled. Most of the antagonisms remain but little of the loyalty. By 2010 only 65 per cent of voters – and, given the low turnout, only 42 per cent of the electorate – supported one or the other of the two major parties. Next year that figure may well be lower and the number of serious parties higher: five in England, four in Scotland (six if we include Ukip and the Greens), five in Wales if we include the Greens, five in Northern Ireland excluding various independents.

Probably the most significant reason for this fragmentation is the change in the UK's occupational structure. In 1951 about 70 per cent of voters were in or from the manual working class. Today the figure is less than 40 per cent. For Labour, these figures are dire. Not all manual workers voted Labour in 1951, but the majority did, and they had no doubt that Labour was the party of the working man and woman (though more that of the working man): they identified with it. None of this is true today. That is one of the problems faced by Maurice Glasman and the other proponents of Blue Labour. They call for an 'authentic' working-class party uninfected by bourgeois social liberalism (no pussy-footing on the issue of race, for example), but the class they wish to win back, the white working class, is in steady decline. The Labour Party was originally designed by and for that class, and while it tried to appeal to voters outside it and had some success, it was fundamentally an industrial working-class party. Today it has to hunt around for support in a much more fluid class system, with a hugely expanded but disunited middle class, house-owning and income-tax-paying, with unfixed political loyalties. In fighting on this ground Labour did itself wilful damage. The further privatisation of the state and its institutions, the private finance initiatives, the outsourcings, the Iraq war: they were all unnecessary and nearly all alienated the party's traditional base.

These changes in the class structure have accompanied, and been partly responsible for, profound ideological changes which have further undermined Labour. Historically it is the party of the state and the public sphere. It has its roots in the late 19th century when much of old privatised Britain was dismantled. Most of the great public institutions of Britain, many now sold off, or like the schools handed over to allies of the ruling party, were 19th-century creations. Over the last forty years these institutions have been under sustained attack, and there is no sign of any let-up. Privatisation is proceeding hell-bent and Labour has done little to resist, even though we know that privatisation is increasingly unpopular, and that some of it always was. Generational changes in party leadership – from those who remember something of the 1940s to those who do not – have been important, as has the emergence of a political elite for whom politics is the whole of life and neoliberalism the proper expression of politics.

These changes first became visible in the 1970s (in the 1960s in Northern Ireland), when the party system began to fragment. (It's easily forgotten, for instance, that as early as the Westminster election of October 1974 the SNP won 30 per cent of the vote in Scotland, not much behind Labour.) The political elite largely misunderstood what happened in that decade: at the time many argued that the state had lost control over sectional interests (which usually meant the unions), but it hadn't. They called Britain 'ungovernable', and it wasn't. But the political and economic structures were under severe strain. The Conservatives reacted by attempting to sweep away all the things they held responsible – 'socialism', the unions, the nationalised industries, inflation – in the hope of securing the support of the electorate through inflationary booms and a kind of re-engineering of the class system. The Conservative government's decision to try out the poll tax in Scotland showed how little it cared for the problems of the Union. Thatcher attempted to put in place a long-term political settlement that was dependent on very risky (and inflationary) industrial and financial policies which, unintentionally, did much to weaken the Tory working class. Her ambiguous 'radical' rhetoric, also unintentionally, served to undermine the Tory elites. The succeeding Labour governments accepted Tory premises and privatisations but at least recognised that the Union was almost on its last legs, as was Britain's social infrastructure. Devolution might have worked had not the decay of the Scottish Labour Party given the SNP its chance. The Blair and Brown governments' efforts to square circles, to hold together incompatible forces, ended in tears, and Brown left it to Cameron and Clegg to begin the whole dreary cycle again.

Then there is immigration. In 1951 Britain had about twenty thousand non-white citizens. Despite some post-war migration from Poland and the Baltic states, in the year Labour received its largest ever vote Britain was overwhelmingly white and Anglo-Celtic. There was some friction between the Irish (who came in large numbers in the 1950s) and their hosts, but Britain was, in so far as any society can be, ethnically and culturally homogenous. This is no longer true. Since 1951 Britain, like most 'advanced' Western countries, has received growing numbers of white and non-white immigrants. In some cases, like Australia, this was the result of government policy: an empty continent had to be populated. In most others, as in Britain, it was a consequence of labour shortages, with workers travelling to where the work was. In fact, though unprecedentedly high, the numbers now entering the UK are proportionately much lower (except in

London) than in other English-speaking countries. Immigration has gone a long way towards transforming Britain culturally and socially while affronting those who don't want it to be transformed. It has always been thought a 'problem', especially for Labour. There is an assumption, which has a long history in most working-class parties, that large numbers of the native population either dislike migrants or feel uncomfortable with them, and that ethnic loyalties are stronger than class loyalties: when race enters the front door class jumps out of the window. There is little doubt that Labour (privately) would prefer an all-white Britain in which class and party loyalty trumped everything else.

Immigration hasn't had the negative effects imputed to it, however. It hasn't created unemployment; it hasn't placed serious strain on the country's social services; it hasn't forced down wages, except possibly at the lowest level (and that could be corrected by raising the legal minimum wage and enforcing it, something the anti-immigration parties are strangely reluctant to do). Despite current wisdom, in no previous election has immigration been a significant or dominant issue: not even in 2010, when, though it did figure, it was less important than the state of the economy. Labour knows all these things. Nonetheless, it now says that allowing EU citizens free entry from 2004 onwards – which Germany didn't do – was 'wrong'. It was surprising but in what sense was it 'wrong'? It wasn't wrong for the economy, or for the country's demography (the natives don't have many children), or for the public and private services that depend on immigration. Labour thinks it was wrong because the press and the Conservatives – whose xenophobia is in large part got up for political reasons – think so. It is their opinions that matter, not those of the people who for whatever reason genuinely dislike immigrants, or feel they have been abandoned by the withdrawal of services to which they feel entitled. Labour's policies on immigration are being determined by the tabloid press, not by grievances unrecognised by a neoliberal society. In fact, whether it likes it or not, Labour is stuck with current levels of migration. While it continues to support EU membership it can do nothing about EU immigration except let the labour market determine its rate. There isn't much it can do about non-EU immigration either. The Tories have tried and failed, and in failing have done real damage to the universities. Labour may be gearing up (yet again) to be tough on immigration, but it will probably get the same response as it gets when it is 'tough' on crime. If you want 'tough' you don't vote Labour.

Labour's problems aren't very different from those of other Western social democratic parties. Over the last twenty or thirty years the great social democratic parties of Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand (and now France) have bled support, usually for the same reasons: the severe decline in the size of the manual working class; the adoption of neoliberal trading and financial policies, which accelerated that decline; the end of socialism as a mobilising force; increasing ethnic heterogeneity; the dying away of a generation that remembers the 1940s; the emergence of a self-seeking political elite. The balance between left and right has probably not altered significantly – much of the social democratic vote has gone to more unambiguously left-wing parties or to the Greens – but it is a different kind of 'left'. The major conservative parties have also lost considerable support to special interest parties, but the parties of the moderate left have suffered most. In this sense we are experiencing not merely a crisis of the British state but also a general crisis of social democracy.

As it approaches next May's general election the Labour Party thus finds itself severely constrained by external circumstances. It does, however, have more freedom of manoeuvre than it thinks. It has made

choices it need not have made. Its greatest mistake was to capitulate on economic policy and to agree with the Tories that the priority should be the elimination of the deficit. The deficit as an issue is largely fraudulent, as is the necessity for austerity. Austerity causes economic deprivation and insecurity without seriously diminishing the deficit or the national debt: there has been no significant reduction in either and the latest monthly borrowing figures suggest that this will remain the case. Only by abolishing the welfare state or encouraging colossal monetary inflation could it be reduced. The failure to eliminate the deficit hasn't led to a collapse of the markets, as we were assured it would. But the deficit will remain central to political rhetoric. Indeed, that it will probably never go away suits the Tories since it allows them to get on with the business of reconstructing the welfare state, which is what they really want to do. On immigration Labour will inevitably be on the defensive and it will need all the help it can get. Austerity doesn't help. If anything, it makes Labour's situation worse, since economic insecurity drives xenophobia, which profits the Tories.

*

What else might Labour do? The idea of fairness requires more salience than Labour seems willing to give it. Tax dodging by individuals or corporations isn't popular and most of the electorate knows what goes on. You don't have to be Old Labour to dislike the privatised utilities or their bosses. The only time Miliband took some control of the political debate was when he attacked them and their pricing policies. Some demagoguery here wouldn't go amiss. That in turn might encourage the party to think about taxation and the inequitable distribution of income. At the moment its spending policies differ little from those of the coalition. Like the coalition it wishes to remove the deficit largely by cuts in social spending rather than by increases in taxation. But even if it doesn't talk much about taxation before the election it will have to say a lot after it (assuming it is in government) if, for instance, the NHS is not to go bankrupt. A mansion tax (if it happens), a tax on the tobacco companies and a tinkering with the top marginal rate won't be enough.

Labour's prospects are fairly bleak, but it does have a few residual advantages. The first is that the Lib Dems will be lucky to save many or any of their working-class votes. The second is that the Tory Party's prospects aren't much less bleak: it has bled as many votes as Labour. The third is that many of the votes Labour has lost are votes it doesn't actually need: the losses are in constituencies it wouldn't expect to win anyway. But unless the party and its leadership show more life, those advantages will be thrown away. As things stand, in a balkanised country, where there is now no real idea of a common interest, in an election fought by several parties in a first-past-the-post system, the outcome will depend on unpredictable effects in unpredictable places. It will almost look like chance.