

## Recapturing Labour's Traditions? History, nostalgia and the re-writing of Clause IV

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The making of New Labour has received a great deal of critical attention, much of which has inevitably focused on the way in which it placed itself in relation to past and future, its inheritances and its iconoclasm.<sup>1</sup> Nick Randall is right to note that students of New Labour have been particularly interested in 'questions of temporality' because 'New Labour so boldly advanced a claim to disrupt historical continuity'.<sup>2</sup> But it is not only academics who have contributed to this analysis. Many of the key figures associated with New Labour have also had their say. The New Labour project was not just about 'making history' in terms of its practical actions; the writing up of that history seems to have been just as important. As early as 1995 Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle were preparing a key text designed 'to enable everyone to understand better why Labour changed and what it has changed into'.<sup>3</sup> This was followed in 1999 by Phillip Gould's analysis of *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party*, which motivated Dianne Hayter to begin a PhD in order to counteract the emerging consensus that the modernisation process began with the appointment of Gould and Mandelson in 1983. The result of this study was published in 2005 under the title *Fightback! Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s* and made the case for a much longer process of modernisation, strongly tied to the trade unions.

I will make no attempt to adjudicate between these accounts, still less to provide an analysis of New Labour's philosophy or experience in office. Instead I want to examine the discourse of change-making; the negotiation between past, present and future. In particular, I will focus on the debates which took place in 1994/5 over the decision to change Clause IV, part iv of the party's constitution as this was one of the most striking attempts to confront the party's relationship with its own past.

In a narrative encouraged by the rhetoric of its architects, the modernisation of the party appeared to be a rejection of Labour's past, made possible through

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Bevir, *New Labour: a critique* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 2005), James Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: the Labour Party and its discontents* (Harlow, 2004), Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: continuity and change in the making of New Labour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Steven Fielding, 'New Labour and the past' in Duncan Tanner et al (eds), *Labour's First Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 367-91; Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party: from Gaitskell to Blair* (London & New York, 2006) and Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul: New Labour and the Blair governments, 1997-2007* (London, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Nick Randall, 'Time and British politics: memory, the present and teleology in the politics of New Labour', *British Politics*, 4: 2 (2009), pp. 188-216 (217)

<sup>3</sup> Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution: can New Labour deliver?* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. vii

Blair's ignorance of its core traditions and ideological background. This is a compelling narrative: a straightforward rejection of Labour's history – an attempt to speak *to* the future rather than *from* the past. But it is not the full story. Although Blair has usually been characterised (particularly by his own party) as peculiarly ahistorical, displaying both ignorance and antipathy towards Labour's past, as Oliver Daddow has demonstrated, a content analysis of his speeches reveals him to have been 'obsessed with history', frequently drawing upon historical lessons, parallels and models.<sup>4</sup> During the debates over Clause IV, Blair and his team used nostalgia as a rhetorical tool in order to neutralise the demands of the party's left-wing for a socialist programme in the present and for the future. But at the same time, they tried to control the party's history, in the guise of both heirs and critical historians, 'correcting' myths and laying down a new story for the future. The basis of this was the need to overcome the damaging historical division between social democrats and social liberals by recovering an older, liberal, co-operative socialism dating back before Webb's drafting of the party's constitution. Blair's revisionism was therefore *historical* revisionism.

Again, though, this account should not be taken at face value. As Michael Freedon argued in 1999, Blair's supposed rediscovery of the new Liberal tradition was in fact nothing of the sort; in fact 'the work of assimilating some of the most advanced ideas of liberalism had already been accomplished by central social-democrats *within* the Labour movement'.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he argued, New Labour's reinterpretation of core social values – civic responsibility, community, individual choice – marks a significant deviation from that progressive tradition and bears traces of an 'older and more capitalist' liberalism and even paternalist conservatism. It is not, however, the validity of New Labour's claim to this particular past that interests us here; rather, it is the value of *history* itself as a rhetorical, political tool.

## I

The 1959/60 debate over Clause IV was rather different from that of 1994/5. In the first place, as Michael Kenny and Martin J. Smith have noted, the leadership remained committed to increasing public ownership as a matter of policy.<sup>6</sup> Their worry was that a pledge to achieve full 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange' was off-putting to voters and over-stated the party's intentions, not that public ownership was itself an old-fashioned policy.

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Daddow, 'Playing games with history: Tony Blair's European policy in the press', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9 (2007), pp. 582–598 (591)

<sup>5</sup> Michael Freedon, 'True blood or false genealogy: New Labour and British social democratic thought', in Gamble and Wright (eds), *The New Social Democracy*, pp.151-165 (151). Original emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Kenny and Martin J. Smith, 'Discourses of modernization: Gaitskell, Blair and the reform of Clause IV' in Charles Pattie et al (eds) *British Elections and Parties Review*, vol. 7 (London: Frank Cass, 1997), pp. 110-126

Indeed, the opponents of change were able to argue that public ownership was the future, was the 'modern' option As Barbara Castle put it,

What are the typical symbols of the modern age? Russia's nationalised sputnik now circling round the moon tracked at every stage by Britain's publicly owned radar telescope at Jodrell Bank. The Hovercraft – the most revolutionary development in transport – sponsored by the National Research Development Corporation which you and I own. Nimrod, the giant atom-smasher now being built next door to Harwell – another product of nationalised enterprise.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly Richard Crossman argued that Britain's mixed economy was 'intrinsically unable to sustain the competition with the Eastern bloc to which we are now committed.' He warned that if Britain did not keep pace with the model of public ownership, exemplified by the USSR, it would be left floundering in the wake of this new modernity.<sup>8</sup> Crossman's principal target was Tony Crosland whose own argument was also predicated on the need to modernise, to overcome Britain's 'natural vice of conservatism' and to increase its productivity which was lagging behind the rest of Europe. For Labour traditionalists and revisionists alike, this was a matter of how best to compete in a new global order, how best to respond to the challenges of modernity. It is striking how often the charge of 'conservatism' was thrown from either side.

In response to Gaitskell's suggestion that the left 'would be performing a useful function if they would only produce a stream of new, forward-looking, imaginative, practical ideas', *Tribune* produced a list of ten ideas 'originally propounded in recent years by the Left-wing of the party and later adopted or considered by the party officially'. This list included the boycott of South Africa, the right to buy council houses and subsidising railways and could, its authors assured readers, 'be vastly extended'. It was however, enough 'to destroy the fiction so sedulously cultivated by the "new thinkers" of the Right-wing, that they provide the modern, forward-looking element in the party while the Left has been rooted in the past.' In fact, the argument ran, it was the right who were unable to produce new ideas, bound as they were to 'accepting established orthodoxies and appeasing established ideas'.<sup>9</sup>

Gaitskell's response to this stalemate was self-aware and sophisticated. Realising that it might not be possible to 'get the straight replacement' of the original Clause IV, he proposed 'embalming' it within the constitution as an historical artefact. It would be book-ended by statements which set it in historical context and made clear that it had now been superseded by the new

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<sup>7</sup> UCL Library Services, Special Collections, Hugh Gaitskell Papers (hereafter UCL HG), C194, Barbara Castle, Presidential Address to Labour Party Annual Conference, Saturday 28 November 1959

<sup>8</sup> R. H. S. Crossman MP, *Labour in the Affluent Society*, Fabian Tract 325 (London: Fabian Society, 1960), p. 24

<sup>9</sup> UCL, HG, C212, press release of Hugh Gaitskell's speech in Nottingham, 13 February 1960, issued by Labour Party East Midlands Regional Office; 'New ideas wanted from the Left, says Mr. Gaitskell – why no thanks for these ten?', *Tribune*, 19 February 1960, p. 5

Party Objects. This would, he hoped 'satisfy... the more reasonable of the fundamentalists' but also make it 'unmistakeably clear (this is essential) that the new Statement is in fact a definitive one so that the Tories can no longer go on misrepresenting us on the basis of the original declaration.'<sup>10</sup> This 'embalming' arguably paved the way for Blair's final removal of the original Clause from the party's constitution. By 1994, the argument was no longer over the proposed scale of public ownership but rather over the leadership's confident declaration that 'nobody believes in Clause IV'. Although, as we will see below, this was not quite true, it had certainly established itself as party orthodoxy.

## II

The broad pattern of the 1959/60 argument was repeated in 1994/5. Again, the modernisers were quick to accuse their opponents of conservatism; again the Tribunate left maintained that only their commitment to socialist principles allowed any possibility of radical change, whether in the present or future. We see the same attempt to reduce the left's position to one of nostalgia, sentiment, symbolism, and the same insistence on the active and political content of their principles.

However, in terms of my argument about the relationship of the Labour Party to its own past, there is an important distinction to draw here. Like Blair, Gaitskell and Crosland argued that Labour should not be bound by its past. But unlike him, they did not attempt to rework the party's history, to present an alternative narrative by which their actions appeared more authentically Labour. Instead, they argued that if Labour was anything, it was the party of change, of progress, of radicalism. Even Crosland, who has been described as having 'a firm sense of tradition, distinguishing him from other revisionists',<sup>11</sup> made little effort to justify his own arguments in terms of Labour's past. His analysis of the various strands of Labour history in *The Future of Socialism* did not lead him to claim any in particular as either more authentic than the others, or as his own ideological ancestry. Instead, he used their very diversity to conclude that 'nothing is more traditional in the history of socialist thought than the violent rejection of past doctrines'.<sup>12</sup>

Blair was not content with such a dismissal of the past. For all that New Labour was framed as a rejection of the party's past, it also involved challenging prevailing perceptions of the party's past. It wasn't enough to attack 'Old' Labour values; 'Old' Labour history also had to go. For instance, at the 1994 Annual Conference, Larry Witty attempted to give members 'a short lesson in history' and disabuse them of their image of Sidney Webb as principled idealist. In a terrifically backhanded speech, he paid tribute to Webb's 'pragmatism and subtlety' in 'fixing' a conference that was 'a bit of a

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<sup>10</sup> UCL, HG, C212, letter from Hugh Gaitskell to Sam Watson, 3 March 1960. Original emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain: 1951-64* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 135

<sup>12</sup> C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 97

shambles' and which included everyone from 'supporters of the Bolshevik Revolution' to 'people whom we should see today as well to the right of the party'. In asking delegates to 'understand the reality of your history', Witty also tried to draw a direct genealogical line from Webb and Henderson down to Blair and Prescott. He pointed out that 'Tony and John will need similar drafting skills over the course of the next few months' and also highlighted 'the commitment that the front bench and the party leadership are making to the future of socialism.'<sup>13</sup>

More subtly, Blair used his Fabian Society lecture on the fiftieth anniversary of 1945 to outline his own interpretation of the party's past. This was based on the history of the 'progressive alliance' between social liberals and social democrats in the early twentieth century – and an ongoing openness to such an alliance within New Labour. Blair stated that his narrative of British democratic socialism included 'Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes and not just Attlee, Bevan or Crosland.'<sup>14</sup> He 'liberates' the concept of socialism (or 'social-ism' as he preferred), from the question of ownership and 'economic dogma'; instead he talked about an 'ethical socialism', 'based on a moral assertion that individuals are interdependent, that they owe duties to one another as well as themselves'. This was presented as a return to the real roots of the party: 'in the rewriting of Clause IV ... far from escaping our traditions, we recaptured them'.<sup>15</sup> Much use was made of the words 're-establishing', 're-foundation' and 'regain' (my emphasis).

Of course, this was not a new strategy. Or a new story. The idea of the progressive alliance had also been used by the founders of the SDP. The narrative of a historic – and perhaps inevitable – alliance of the centre-left allowed them to maintain a sense of personal continuity as they left Labour and eventually merged with the Liberal Party. It became a way of maintaining their fidelity to Labour's past, at the same time as critiquing the path the Labour Party had taken since 1918. Indeed, Blair drew heavily on the work of David Marquand – himself a founder member of the SDP.

Yet, this was not a legacy to be proud of. As Steven Fielding has argued, the SDP's example meant that 'highlighting New Labour's revisionist debt was much more hazardous than paying compliments to New Liberalism'.<sup>16</sup> To be seen as heirs to the 'splitters' would have meant immediate death for the incipient project of New Labour. Yet the ghost of the SDP did haunt Blair. Not only did some opponents portray him as a betrayer in the mould of the Gang of Four, they also suggested that without the particular mission enshrined in Clause IV, Labour had become indistinguishable from the (now defunct) SDP:

I used to be a member of the Labour Party, now it appears I belong to something called New Labour. If the leadership are really concerned to

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<sup>13</sup> Labour Party, *Annual Conference Report* (London: Labour Party, 1994), p. 198

<sup>14</sup> Tony Blair, 'Let us Face the Future', 1945 Anniversary Lecture (London: Fabian Society, 1995), p. 4

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>16</sup> Fielding, 'New Labour and the past', p. 383

find a new name that reflects their swing to the right, how about 'Old SDP'?<sup>17</sup>

When the gang of four split from the Labour Party they demanded one member, one vote, the abolition of Clause IV and the reduction of trade union power and influence within the Labour movement. Does any of this sound familiar comrades?<sup>18</sup>

Blair tried to counter these accusations, with the quip that, 'When you can think of no decent reason why something is wrong, you resort to saying there is to be an SDP Mark Two in the hope that everyone gets out strings of garlic and crucifixes.'<sup>19</sup>

Even Blair's attitude to his revisionist ancestors *within* the Labour Party was rather cautious. Although he stood himself in Gaitskell's footsteps the moment he announced his intention to revise Clause IV, this legacy was not always explicitly claimed. Indeed, Philip Gould noted that 'The language used by Gaitskell in public and others in private is *uncannily similar* to that used by Tony Blair and other modernisers a generation later' as if this was pure coincidence.<sup>20</sup> By depicting this as an 'uncanny', unwitting case of history repeating itself, Gould managed to present Blair both as Gaitskell's heir and as his own man. He also made the modernising of the Labour party seem somehow inevitable; a task which would recur generation by generation until it was completed. As Gould was well aware, Gaitskell's legacy was ambiguous. Although it placed Blair firmly within a Labour tradition, it also carried its own narrative structure of failure and compromise. In an open letter to *Tribune*, half of Labour's MEPs called for the leadership to follow Gaitskell's example in accepting a compromise, by which a new statement of aims and values stood side-by-side with the existing Clause IV, as with the New and Old Testaments.<sup>21</sup>

### III

The debate over the revision of Clause IV had huge symbolic value. It was presented as a battle for the history, identity and soul of the party. As Hugo Young wrote in the *Guardian*, 'Ancient household gods will be invited to make their presence felt. The poltergeists of the past may rattle the furniture.'<sup>22</sup> In the event, the debate was by no means as tempestuous as expected. The revision passed remarkably smoothly at a Special Conference convened on 29 April 1995. The 6,500 responses to the party's consultation exercise were also overwhelmingly in favour of change. This is remarkable, especially as it would seem logical to assume that those who were particularly opposed to the

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<sup>17</sup> Letter from Colin Penfold, Powys, *Guardian*, 29 April 1995, p. 26

<sup>18</sup> Constituency delegate, *Special Conference Report* (Labour Party, 29 April 1995), p. 297

<sup>19</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Prescott calms ruffled left', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 1

<sup>20</sup> Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: how the modernisers saved the Labour Party* (London, 1999), p. 33. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> 'Testament to equality and democracy', *Tribune*, 4 November 1994, p. 4

<sup>22</sup> Hugo Young, 'Genuine Acclaim; Simple Truths', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, pp. 1; 22

leadership's plans would be the most keen to make their views known. Very few respondents were not prepared to agree 'that the current Clause IV does not set out Labour's actual values in a clear and concise manner'. Even among those who refused to 'agree', responses were rather equivocal. For instance, one said that he would prefer to retain the old Clause IV, with a new statement of values; another felt that although 'perhaps [there is] nothing wrong [with] Clause IV if you are to argue for it's [sic] principles', he was aware that he was in a minority and 'so to make the best of an unsure exercise' had completed the questionnaire anyway.<sup>23</sup>

It is clear that Blair did not get the battle he had bargained on. Partly this may have been because the leadership heavily promoted the postal balloting of all members, rather than relying on the votes of constituency activists. The thinking was that those who were less heavily steeped in the party's internal culture would have less of a personal investment in its totemic symbols, such as Clause IV. There is some evidence that this policy paid off. At the Special Conference, a delegate from Bristol South said:

I have been elected to come here and vote for this new resolution, but I'm actually speaking against it, because all the ones that do work in the party – the CLP – voted against change, but when it went out to the postal vote we had an overwhelming majority for the new clause. Yet none of those people participate in the Labour Party. They pay their subs, but they don't do anything in the party whatsoever. (Applause).<sup>24</sup>

However, this is not the entire explanation. After sixteen years in opposition, the party was desperate to believe that Blair had the solution to their electoral woes. One respondent said, 'We have been in opposition for too long. We can only win the next General Election under Tony Blair, so if he wants to change Clause IV, he has my TOTAL support on this and any other topic.'<sup>25</sup> Another answered each question with one of the following statements: 'Full support for T. Blair', 'Support the line of T. Blair fully' and 'I support fully the line taken by the N.E.C. under the leadership of T. Blair.'<sup>26</sup> As is well known from the work of Whiteley and Seyd, many new members were attracted to the party because of its attempts to change. They found that post-1994 recruits were 'significantly more likely to be modernizers' and 'more trusting of the party leadership' than people who had joined the party before 1994. This was in spite of being more likely to be working-class (one in six as against one in eight) and slightly less likely to be graduates than the pre-1994 cohort.<sup>27</sup> This is borne out by the membership surveys. For instance one respondent said, 'I became a member 18 months ago – due to the changes by John Smith; Tony Blair; John Prescott. Keep this up and caring people will want to join.' Much

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<sup>23</sup> LHASC, Labour Party Papers, Clause IV Consultation (hereafter LP Clause IV Consultation). It should also be noted that a third respondent agreed with the initial statement but later wrote 'Clause IV has stood the test of time unlike this questionnaire [sic] – Leave it alone.'

<sup>24</sup> Labour Party, *Special Conference Report*, (London: Labour Party, 1995), p. 299

<sup>25</sup> LP Clause IV Consultation

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Seyd and Paul Whiteley, *New Labour's Grassroots: the transformation of Labour Party membership* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 155; 42-43

older members were also keen to follow Blair's lead. One woman who said 'I have [been] a socialist from the day I was born 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1912. Have fought all my life for socialism', responded to a question on Labour's economic policy with the words, 'I trust Tony Blair as our leader.'<sup>28</sup> The blandness of these responses speaks not of radical hopes for the future but rather a grim determination to seize political control in the present. The focus was on the immediate task of winning an election; the future would be dealt with in time.

#### IV

Yet not everyone was so easily satisfied. A vocal minority opposed Blair's plans all the way. Were they, as the leadership claimed, sentimentally holding onto old certainties or did they have other, more vital, objections? The focal point for the opposition to the rewriting of Clause IV was the Defend Clause 4 Campaign, organised by the Campaign Group of MPs, who in the course of the campaign changed their name to the Socialist Group. This grouping was led by Tony Benn MP, who emphasised the need to 'make clear to the movement and to the public that socialist ideas are still to be found within the party [in the hope that this] might discourage members of the party from resigning as some have suggested they might if Clause 4 is deleted.'<sup>29</sup> Numerous individual members of the party also made their opposition to the proposed change known in the letters pages of the *Guardian* and *Tribune* and by speaking at local, regional and national party meetings.

Several reports of apparently overwhelmingly pro-change conferences include references to wider disquiet. For instance, a report of the Scottish conference's acceptance of the change also notes that George Galloway received the biggest cheer of the afternoon for the words, 'Don't sell the banner; think before you throw it in the dustbin of history.'<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the Labour Women's conference voted 81.59% in favour of change, yet the *Guardian* noted that 'Clare Short, party spokeswoman on women, conceded that Mr Blair had probably suffered his worst heckling when he spoke about his clause to the conference on Saturday.'<sup>31</sup> Amidst a string of articles claiming that the constituencies were overwhelmingly in favour of change, a *Guardian* report on a mass meeting in Hartlepool reveals that, 'As in most of Labour's Clause 4 meetings interventions from the 450-strong audience were heavily in favour of keeping the old form of words, with activists coming ... from as far away as Southwark in London.'<sup>32</sup>

While this does not mean that opposition to the change was widespread, it does show that it was deeply felt. It is generally acknowledged that the reason

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<sup>28</sup> LP Clause IV Consultation

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Patrick Wintour and Stephen Bates, 'Benn urges the left to rebel on Clause 4', *Guardian*, 22 February 1995, p. 6

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Erlend Clouston, 'Blair triumph in Scottish Clause 4 vote', *Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 1

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Labour women vote strongly in favour of the new Clause 4', *Guardian*, 3 April 1995, p. 2

<sup>32</sup> Martin Wainwright, '"New Labour" Mandelson blanches at common ownership of chips as Scargill extols Marks and Spencers', *Guardian*, 28 March 1995, p. 6

for this strength of feeling was because the change seemed to require a painful break with the past. It was said at the time that the debate was ‘as much an argument about finding a proper relationship with the past as knowing what is right for the future.’<sup>33</sup> An advert placed in *Tribune* by the MSF Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Council, is a particularly neat illustration of the sense that the change violated a direct ideological line of descent between past and future. It was presented as ‘Lost and Found’ classified advert and read: “LOST – CLAUSE 4. If found please return to the Labour Party c/o Keir Hardie, Sidney Webb, Clem Attlee, Nye Bevan and all future generations of the working class.”<sup>34</sup>

## V

Yet, despite received opinion, the most striking thing about the opponents of change is that they were not simply tied to the past. They clearly viewed Clause IV as a living statement, with real implications for policy in the present and in the future. It was held to be a succinct definition of an essential principle, as important for securing social justice and democracy in the late-twentieth century as on the day it was written. As Alice Mahon MP put it in an article for *Tribune*, if Clause IV ‘wasn’t relevant to today’s political agenda, then we would be right to abandon it. The truth is it is entirely relevant.’<sup>35</sup> Numerous letter writers to both the *Guardian* and *Tribune* cited the relevance (indeed the necessity) of common ownership in tackling pressing contemporary issues, from the dominance of multi-nationals and the democratic deficit in the World Trade Organisation to social deprivation and pension provision. As one put it, ‘If Clause Four is so unrealistic as a means of organising an economy – what of the free market system?’ He went on to say that ‘In a few decades our unwillingness to find ways to democratise economic processes will just look plain stupid.’<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps the most graphic illustration of the belief in Clause IV as a statement of contemporary policy was the debate over Composite Motion, No. 57, which took place at the Party Conference in 1994, soon after Blair’s speech announcing the proposed change. The motion was brought by Glasgow Maryhill CLP and called for the NEC ‘to draw up a socialist economic, industrial and social strategy’.<sup>37</sup> It was a cry to act upon the principles of Clause IV and – crucially – it was tabled before anyone outside the inner circle had any suspicion that Blair was to set out to reform it. Composite 57 was not inspired by Blair’s direct attack on Clause IV but by a concern ‘that the electoral strategy currently being pursued by the shadow cabinet places little emphasis on this constitutional aim.’<sup>38</sup> It was a continuation of a theme raised by motions in previous years, particularly Composite 62 in 1993, which

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Kettle, ‘Laying Labour’s ghost with a liberal dose’, *Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 25

<sup>34</sup> *Tribune*, 23 December, 1994, p. 8

<sup>35</sup> Alice Mahon MP, ‘Standing the test of time’, *Tribune*, 16 December 1994, p. 4

<sup>36</sup> Peter Robbins, *Guardian*, 10 October 1994, p. 21

<sup>37</sup> Labour Party, *Conference Arrangements Committee Report* (London: Labour Party, 1994), p. 32

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

made clear that Clause IV should be more than a symbol of socialist commitment; it should form the basis of practical policy proposals:

This Conference reaffirms its belief in an *adherence* to paragraph 4 of Clause 4 of the party's constitution as printed on every Labour Party membership card ... Furthermore, Conference believes it to be essential that the present wording remains unchanged and rejects any attempt to alter what is the fundamental basis of Labour Party *policy* ... and the only *practical* way of attaining a more equitable and egalitarian society.<sup>39</sup>

Although the tabling of Composite 57 cannot be said to owe anything to nostalgia invoked by the threat of change, after Blair's speech it became inevitable that the debate would in effect become a response to Blair's announcement that Clause IV was now under review. As Patrick Wintour put it, 'Mr Mearns had expected to move his motion to a half-full hall with little or no media attention. Only on Wednesday did it become clear that he was to be the Boy David to take on the Goliath of the party machine.'<sup>40</sup> Despite this, as Michael White noted, and in contrast to conference debates of the 1970s and early 1980s, 'Virtually no personal attacks were made on the leadership. Few fingers were wagged in an accusing manner. There was no rhetoric of betrayal.'<sup>41</sup> This is surprising and suggests either that the party had moved on further than anticipated by the leadership, or that the issue was simply too important to reduce to crude political theatre. Equally, it is striking that the debate in 1994 was far less nostalgic than that in 1993, which had invoked the ghosts of Tawney, Attlee, Robert Tressell, Ian Mikardo and the founding fathers of the party.<sup>42</sup>

Far from being a 'usual suspect', Jim Mearns, the proposer of the motion, was a last-minute stand-in. His local MP, Maria Fyfe, assured the *Guardian* that 'Jim is not a Trot. He is a mainstream member of the Labour Party.'<sup>43</sup> Mearns told the hall, 'I am sick of being told by political commentators that socialism is irrelevant, dead or dying ... socialism is very much alive and well and striding forward with victory in sight.'<sup>44</sup> His use of Blairite phrasing, 'Let's be tough on capitalism and tough on the causes of capitalism', had the effect of insisting that his calls for socialism in practice were just as serious, just as pragmatic and just as contemporary as Blair's policy proposals. In an article subsequently published in *Tribune*, Mearns reaffirmed that, 'It is important that the party fights the issues of the day in the language of the day but *always* in a socialist framework, a framework delineated by Clause Four'. He also asked:

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<sup>39</sup> Labour Party, *Conference Arrangements Committee Report* (London: Labour Party, 1993), p. 37. Emphases added

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Vote for the past defies leader', *Guardian*, 7 October 1994, p. 7

<sup>41</sup> Michael White, 'Party may still be in turmoil but with a crucial difference', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 8

<sup>42</sup> Labour Party, *Annual Conference Report* (Labour Party, 1993), pp. 271-77

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Michael White, 'Party may still be in turmoil but with a crucial difference', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 8

<sup>44</sup> *Annual Conference Report*, 1994, p. 192

Why should workers not obtain the full fruits of their industry? How can this be achieved without the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange which are the engines of any economy? Is it so wrong to strive for the best obtainable system of popular administration of each industry and service?<sup>45</sup>

Yet, despite this clear call for an active commitment to the principles of Clause IV in the present day, the modernising wing of the party was able to present the debate as essentially one of sentiment versus pragmatism. Immediately after the debate, Blair 'said that no one had seriously got up to defend Clause Four, merely to criticise his tactics.'<sup>46</sup> Alastair Campbell's diary records a more vivid exchange. In response to a warning that 'to some people this is like going into church and taking down the cross', Blair reportedly responded, 'Oh for heaven's sake ... people believe in God, and they believe in Christ. Name me a single person who actually believes in what Clause 4 says.'<sup>47</sup> Over the following months, the claim that 'nobody believes in Clause Four'<sup>48</sup> was repeated time and again:

A vocal campaign to keep Clause Four has been set up, which argues ... though outdated and not necessarily what we would write now [it] has a symbolic appeal and that to change it would cause more trouble than it is worth.<sup>49</sup>

Labour is not going to nationalise the means of production, distribution and exchange and we should be honest enough to say that. Few believe that Clause Four is relevant today but we hang onto it as unchallenged and unchallengeable dogma.<sup>50</sup>

## VI

Ironically, the most fervent opponents of the change of wording would probably have agreed with Blair that, 'The idea that we cannot touch a 77-year-old constitution is farcical. We are not a preservation society guarding the ideological crown jewels. We are a dynamic living movement which seeks to change this country for the better.'<sup>51</sup> Where they differed was over their vision of socialism as a 'dynamic living movement'. Despite the modernisers' claim that their opponents remained in thrall to an obsolete form of words, there seems to have been a willingness to discuss revising the constitution, even among the left-wing of the party and from the trades unions:

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<sup>45</sup> Jim Mearns, 'Back from breaking point', *Tribune*, 4 November 1994, p. 7

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Prescott calms ruffled left', *Guardian*, 8 October 1994, p. 1

<sup>47</sup> Alastair Campbell, *The Blair Years: extracts from the Alastair Campbell diaries* (London: Hutchinson, 2007), p. 16

<sup>48</sup> Giles Radice quoted by Michael White, 'Blair defines the new Labour', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 1

<sup>49</sup> Ben Lucas, 'The principles of renewal', *Tribune*, 2 December 1994, p. 6

<sup>50</sup> Greg Pope, 'Saying what we mean, meaning what we say', *Tribune*, 28 October 1994, p. 7

<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Michael White, 'Cliffhanger Clause 4 win boosts Blair', *The Guardian*, 11 March 1995, p. 8

We are in a period of change. Anything agreed in 1918 we should be able to review in 1994. We look forward to the consultation.<sup>52</sup>

I was taken by surprise, but it is not an unreasonable point to say that in 1994 the constitution needs redrawing. There was no indication that this was the end of socialism.<sup>53</sup>

Yes – needs re-writing but without scrapping the principles which define socialism.<sup>54</sup>

The caveat of course lies in that final sentence: the retention of socialism. It seems that many party members saw the debate on Clause IV as an opportunity to commit themselves anew to socialist principles, within the context of the late-twentieth century. As one CLP delegate, speaking on Composite 57 said, 'I welcome the debate we are going to have in the coming 12 months, because I am so confident in my socialism; I feel it in my bones, it is the centre of my being. It is everything I am.'<sup>55</sup> *Tribune* immediately launched a conference to discuss their hopes for the new Clause IV, noting that, 'There is much that should be in Labour's constitution but which isn't. Where is the mention of socialism or the redistribution of power and wealth for instance?'<sup>56</sup> A group of MPs and trade union leaders also wrote an open letter to the *Guardian*, urging the party to 'seize the opportunity' to enshrine a commitment to full employment in the new constitution.<sup>57</sup>

This attitude was also present among the members who responded positively to the consultation exercise. Some felt that, although they were happy to change Clause IV in principle, the new wording did not inspire them. When asked to identify anything that had been missed out, one said 'A feeling of crusade' and another, 'Some recognition that there is a spiritual, even idealist element: "the brotherhood of man"' and called for the party to 'Remember Rabbin Burns!'<sup>58</sup> Others made suggestions for the new constitution which could not have been further from the intentions of the leadership. One respondent wanted it to include the words 'From each according to ability, to each according to need.' Another felt that the new statement should emphasise that 'Individual freedom is largely illusory. We should aim to emancipate classes / categories of people'. In response to a question on how best to promote a mixed economy, he suggested that the party needed to 'Come up with an even better way of democratically controlling all leading firms. State clearly that the market mechanism is an outright failure.'<sup>59</sup> A third respondent recommended an 'apparent wealth tax' (to apply to housing, yachts, expensive cars etc); an opposition to company cars; worker

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<sup>52</sup> Roger Lyons, leader of MSF, quoted by Patrick Wintour and Keith Harper, 'Unions favour redrawing of constitution', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 9

<sup>53</sup> Michael Meacher, quoted by Patrick Wintour and Keith Harper, 'Unions favour redrawing of constitution', *Guardian*, 5 October 1994, p. 9

<sup>54</sup> LP Clause IV Consultation. Original emphasis.

<sup>55</sup> *Annual Conference Report*, 1994, p. 195

<sup>56</sup> Editorial, *Tribune*, 14 October 1994, p. 2

<sup>57</sup> *Guardian*, 6 March 1995, p. 21

<sup>58</sup> LP Clause IV Consultation

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*

representation on the boards of all major companies and an 85% top-rate tax bracket for salaries above £150,000 (including shares) so as to 'Challenge those in management & directorships to leave their employment or companies'. He also suggested that there should be a requirement that 'those persons responsible for managing the state-controlled public utilities (Post Office, rail, NHS etc) be shown in their dedication not only competent but socialists too!!'<sup>60</sup>

Similar attitudes were reflected in the parliamentary party. Despite the overwhelming support for the revision of Clause IV, a survey of Labour MPs carried out before the 1997 election found that sixty-eight percent regarded 'public ownership [as]... crucial to the achievement of social justice'. After the election, forty-eight percent of the much larger, and younger, PLP remained dedicated to the principle of state ownership of major public services.<sup>61</sup> As Edmund Dell notes, this 'was still a large percentage in a party that had begun to describe itself as New Labour. It demonstrated the extent to which New Labour was a camouflage for deep-seated instincts that Blair had not yet charmed away.'<sup>62</sup> While these MPs might have been happy to change Clause IV and to embrace a new, softer wording, they remained committed to the principles which underpinned it: exactly the opposite dynamic to that portrayed by Blair. It was this practical dedication to socialism that Blair and his allies could not – or perhaps wilfully *would not* – understand. They could not accept that the opponents of the reform were following their own request for the party to 'say what we mean and mean what we say'; that it was their *meanings*, rather than just their methods of discourse which differed. By reducing their argument to one that *only* traded in history, symbolism and emotion, Blair was able to neutralise his opponents and to ignore their desire to discuss the ideological direction of the party.

## VII

The debate on Composite 57 was paired with that on Composite 56, a motion 'congratulat[ing] the Co-operative movement on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Rochdale Pioneers Co-operative Society'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed most of the speakers in the debate referred to both motions. Many of those who rejected Composite 57 were very happy to sing the praises of Composite 56. Not one person spoke against it. It seemed to have no controversial content, nothing with which a member of the Labour movement could possibly disagree. It therefore became something of a touchstone; a way of signalling one's commitment to socialist principles and to the movement's historic roots at the same time as denying the appeal to act on those principles and roots in the modern day. However, it is not as simple as that. In addition to offering

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>61</sup> Michael Kenny and Martin J. Smith, '(Mis)understanding Blair', in *Political Quarterly*, 68:3 1997, pp. 220-230; Peter Riddell, *Times*, 28 April, 1998. Both quoted in Edmund Dell, *A Strange Eventful History: democratic socialism in Britain* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), p. 544

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>63</sup> *Conference Arrangements*, 1994, p. 32

congratulations, Composite 56 also called for action from the Labour party on a number of key policies, including a Co-operatives Act; statutory recognition of housing co-operatives; legislation recognizing and protecting voluntary, mutual and self-help groups 'as a separate and distinct sector of the economy; a commitment to fostering co-operative principles in future policy; and the creation of regional co-operative development agencies.<sup>64</sup>

Why then was the discussion (it doesn't really warrant the term 'debate') over this motion so anodyne, compared to the fierce controversy aroused by Composite 57? There are two possible answers. The clue to the first is in the deliberately contemporary language of the motion, which recognised that the Co-operative Party was 'now revitalised with new vision and new direction'.<sup>65</sup> It disguised an appeal to old principles as a step forward into a world of regional government and the social economy. The Secunder of the motion made the distinction between this approach and that of Composite 57 very clear:

the scale and emphasis of the Co-op has grown and changed so much since those days that it has had to modernise and change to expand to remain successful, keeping alive its retail outlets and jobs. So, too, we in the Labour Party have had to change and modernise, but we will never lose our principles and values. Later on we will debate Clause IV. This, too, needs modernising, as it uses only the language of the Scargillsaurus.<sup>66</sup>

However, this answer is not satisfactory because, as we have already noted, the defenders of Clause IV also insisted upon the relevance of Clause IV to the modern world – to multi-national corporations, globalisation and devolution.<sup>67</sup> The second answer lies in the particular cluster of roots to which Composite 56 appealed. Larry Witty emphasised the need for a plural notion of public ownership 'which is the centre of [Labour's] industrial policy today [and] reflected in the co-operative ideals in Composite 56'.<sup>68</sup> This is precisely the heritage which Blair and his allies were so keen to resurrect.

## VIII

So why the need to pay such respect to this past? Why not simply follow Crosland and joyfully remind the party that 'nothing is more traditional in the history of socialist thought than the violent rejection of past doctrines'?<sup>69</sup>

I would suggest that the answer to this lies in changes in both political and

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>66</sup> *Annual Conference Report*, 1994, p. 191-2

<sup>67</sup> For a discussion of the Co-op's own struggle to modernise see Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: culture, consumerism and participation, 1954-70* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 46-74. The role of Crosland in this process is particularly noteworthy.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 198

<sup>69</sup> Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*, p. 97

popular culture over the previous two decades. Labour has always had a culture of respecting and honouring its past, of paying tribute to its martyrs. In part this was the culture New Labour aimed to shed. In doing so, it confirmed Henry Drucker's 1979 depiction of social democracy as ignoring the past in its struggle to appear "modern", "up-to-date", "*au fait*" and to present Labour as 'a party of the future.' In contrast, he emphasised that the Labour party only exists 'as a result of certain remembered past actions' and that this 'plays a crucial role in defining what the party is about' and 'what kind of future politics it will tolerate.' The party, moreover, 'needs a strong sense' not only of its own institutional past, but also 'the past of the Labour movement which produced and sustains it.'<sup>70</sup>

Interestingly, Drucker commented that this search for modernity was 'in harmony with the dominant time-perspective of our age'.<sup>71</sup> However, he didn't take account of the 'heritage boom' which had been building since the early 1970s and which has continued to grow ever since. The idea of discovering one's roots has become an important means of self-authentication, of demonstrating integrity and continuity.<sup>72</sup> It is exactly this attitude which Blair was tapping into. Yet, this doesn't negate Drucker's point. Such an approach isn't about betraying or honouring the past; instead it is adopted and adapted as a way of affirming our identities in the present. For New Labour, the past was a rhetorical tool, not a political force.

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<sup>70</sup> H. M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 35; 25

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35

<sup>72</sup> See for instance, Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London: Profile Books, 2002); Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, vol. 1: past and present in contemporary culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994)