

Chapter 4. 1992-97: *The End of Opposition?*

Introduction

Neil Kinnock decided to resign immediately after the 1992 election defeat, rather than waiting until October when the leadership contest could have taken place at the Party's Annual Conference. In July 1992, therefore, the electoral college met to elect a new Leader and Deputy-Leader. There was little doubt over who would win the contest: John Smith, the Shadow Chancellor and a leading right-winger, won over ninety per cent of the electoral college vote, easily defeating the only other candidate, Bryan Gould (Alderman and Carter, 1993: 62). In order to balance the Leadership ticket, a leading member of the 'soft' left, Margaret Beckett, was elected Deputy-Leader.

Under Smith the Party continued to change, although arguably not at the same rapid pace as under either his predecessor or successor. In May 1994, however, John Smith died suddenly of a heart attack. At that point Labour had recovered its popularity to the extent that many expected Smith to be the next Prime Minister. Like Hugh Gaitskill before him (who had also died suddenly after leading the Party to the brink of power in 1963), Smith was referred to by several obituary writers as 'the best Prime Minister Britain never had'.

In the leadership election of July 1994, the first to be contested under the new election rules (discussed below), Tony Blair, the Shadow Home Secretary and a Kinnock protégé, defeated John Prescott and Margaret Beckett (the acting leader) by winning fifty-seven per cent of the overall vote (Alderman and Carter, 1995: 448). John Prescott secured the Deputy-Leadership, producing a Leadership team which balanced not only the left and right of the Party, but also the 'traditionalists' and 'modernisers'.

Under Blair, the transformation of Party structures has taken on a pace unknown even under Neil Kinnock. Moreover, the Labour Party also appears to have had more success negotiating external structural factors, to the extent that the Labour Party is now expected to win the general election to be held on May 1.

In this chapter, the same format found in the previous two chapters shall be employed, with one major modification. Since the 1997 general election has obviously not yet taken place, it is not possible to interpret the outcomes of strategies adopted by agents in terms of success at the following general election, and there are, of course, no British Election Study data available for 1997. Whilst most observers are expecting a Labour victory, and opinion poll data employed here suggest that this will be the case, the interpretation of agents' actions must remain necessarily tentative. As pollsters found in 1992, general election results are not always easy to forecast.

I. Internal Structures

i. Party Organisation

In the previous discussions of Party structures above, one of the most contentious and recurring issues centred around the role of trade unions, and specifically their block voting powers in electing leaders, selecting parliamentary candidates, and at Party Conference. The trade union block vote once accounted for ninety per cent of the total votes cast at Party Conferences. This placed a considerable constraint on agents in the Party, since without the backing of major trade unions, few policy or organisational changes could ever gain enough support to secure a majority. At the constituency level, prospective candidates had no chance of being selected to contest a parliamentary seat without union backing, and the same was also true for aspiring Party Leaders. Although the power of the trade unions had been reduced, so that in 1993 their share of the Conference vote had fallen to only seventy per cent¹, many inside the Party believed that Labour's historic links to the unions, and in particular the extent of the latter's control over the former's decision making, were damaging Labour's image in the eyes of voters who were often reminded in Conservative Party advertisements of the 'Winter of Discontent' and the so-called era of 'beer and sandwiches' meetings between union leaders and Labour Prime Ministers in Downing Street.

In one of Kinnoch's last acts as Leader, he had established an NEC Review Group to examine the union links, which consisted of members of the Trade Union and Women's sections of the NEC, MPs (including John Prescott), Party Officials and the academic Lewis Minkin (Shaw, 1996: 193). In the aftermath of the 1992 general election defeat, modernisers in the Party, with the support of sympathetic journalists, made the assertion (one that was not supported by any psephological evidence) that Labour's union links cost the Party the election (Minkin, 1992: 678). Hence the findings of the Group's investigation came under a great deal of scrutiny.

On the basis of the Group's findings, at the 1993 Annual Conference the Party debated far-reaching reforms of the Party-union link. The reforms were in three areas: the election of the Party Leader and Deputy-Leader, the block vote at Conference, and the selection of parliamentary candidates.

Instead of the then current arrangement for Leadership elections, where forty per cent of the votes came from the unions, the proposed electoral college would be split equally between the three groups (unions, MPs and MEPs, and CLPs), with the union votes being cast on the basis of levy-

¹ It was agreed that the size of the trade union vote at conference (as a proportion of all votes) would gradually decrease as membership levels increased. At the 1996 Party Conference, for the first time CLP delegates were able to cast a majority of the Conference votes, whilst the unions only had forty-nine per cent of the total votes (*The Guardian*, 9/30/96).

paying union members casting votes on an individual basis, rather than *en bloc*, as was the case previously.²

With regards to voting at the Annual Conference, it was also proposed that the block vote system be abandoned, and that the share of the CLPs' vote at Conference would continue to gradually increase. There was general agreement amongst trade unionists about these proposals. Supporting the reforms, Bill Jordan, the leader of the right-wing engineering union, the AEEU, noted that:

... it is here, colleagues, at this Conference in full view of every elector in the country, that the monstrous inequality of the block vote does the most damage. They see three men stand up and cast more than half of the trade union vote at this Conference. They see just six men raise their block vote and outvote everybody represented here at this Conference. No wonder constituency delegates come to this rostrum every year and ask, "*Why do we bother coming?*". (RACLP 1993: 134; original emphasis.)

It was the third proposal, however, related to the selection of parliamentary candidates, that was most controversial, and almost destroyed John Smith's Leadership. This issue had remained unresolved since the previous system of 'voluntary OMOV' (discussed in Chapter Three) was abandoned as unworkable in 1990. In place of the block vote at the constituency level, Smith proposed a system of OMOV for members of trade unions who not only paid the political levy but also joined the Party as full members at a special reduced rate.³

Despite efforts by Smith himself to win over the unions by going to their conferences and arguing the case for the reforms, the two largest unions, the TGWU and the GMB, opposed the measures. Since this particular vote was to use the block vote, the chances of the reforms being passed therefore appeared slim.

In addition to last-minute acts of persuasion by Smith at the Annual Conference itself (see McSmith, 1994: 334), he also asked John Prescott, the Party's leading 'traditionalist', to wind up the debate in support of the reforms. Prescott's speech became famous as much for its tortured syntax as its vigorous support for the reforms and the assurance that Labour was not going to break from the unions, but it was nevertheless seen as highly significant that Prescott, with his

² 'Levy paying' union members are those who pay the 'political levy' on top of their regular union dues. The levy went towards the unions' affiliation fees to the Party. One of the trade union reforms of the Thatcher era was that members could now elect not to pay the levy, so that payment became a positive action in support of the Labour Party. Under the block vote system, all of a union's votes were cast in a single block, after various degrees of consultation with members; under the new system the principle of 'One Member One Vote' would be applied, meaning that votes would be counted on an individual basis.

³ This 'levy-plus' proposal was suggested by John Prescott in the hope that the unions would accept this compromise. See McSmith, 1996: 333-4.

strong union links, should seek to unite the Party over an issue that had essentially become a vote of confidence in Smith's Leadership.

Somewhat unusually for Party Conferences in recent years, the vote produced what Andy McSmith called a "genuine cliffhanger" (1996: 28). The reforms were carried by the narrowest of margins: 48.645 per cent in favour compared with 48.454 per cent against (Labour Party, 1993a: 20). Thus, by a majority of less than 0.2 per cent, the reforms irrevocably altered the nature of Labour's organisational structure, reducing the significance of the block vote and changing the nature of the unions' influence.⁴

In terms of changes to organisational structures, the reforms to the Party's relationship with the unions have been the major changes in the last five years, partly because of a desire to avoid more conflict in the run-up to the 1997 general election. Smith in particular preferred a consensual leadership style and was less inclined to risk further divisions, and indeed it seems that he would even have preferred to avoid a conflict over the union links if at all possible. In many respects Smith was able to use the resources available to him as Party Leader to great effect -- he was able to address all the main trade union conferences to argue his case; he was able to present the proposals himself to Conference; he was able to persuade John Prescott to speak in support of the reforms; and he was also able to transform the debate into what was essentially a vote of confidence in his Leadership (aided, of course, by Party spin doctors who portrayed the union 'barons' in a negative and reactionary light). But the wafer-thin majority in the final vote also demonstrated that, on some issues at least, the potential limits to the Leader's powers to transform Party structures remained very much apparent.

In the period since Tony Blair became Leader in 1994, there has been a continuation of the changes to organisational structures, which are indicative of the centralisation of power within the Party. We have already seen how the introduction of what was seen as greater internal Party democracy in the form of OMOV had been favoured by Kinnock and other right-wing leaders precisely because it conversely enabled the Leadership to increase its powers at the expense of activists in the CLPs and trade unions (Scarrow, 1996: 167). Since non-active members are more likely to be moderate than activists, and thus closer to the Leaders' (and the electorate's) position, an increase in their influence has been welcomed by recent Leaders.

Tony Blair has used this factor to consolidate his strength on several occasions. When the debate over Clause IV of the Party Constitution took place in 1995 (discussed below), the Leadership

⁴ Despite these reforms, the term 'One Member, One Vote' remains something of a misnomer. If a Party member is affiliated to several groups, she can cast several votes in the election of the Party Leadership. For example, a Party member who is also a member of a trade union and a socialist society such as the Fabians would have three votes -- one for her membership of each group. During the 1994 Leadership election, one of my university colleagues had seven votes to cast due to his various activities related to the Party.

encouraged a ballot of members to take place in all CLPs, and there was overwhelming support for his reforms. Similarly, when the pre-manifesto document, *New Labour New Life for Britain*, was published in 1996, all Party members were asked to approve it in a ballot, in what was effectively a plebiscite on the direction in which Blair was leading the Party. Ninety-five per cent of members responding voted in favour of the document's contents.

Given the benefits to the Leadership of the democratisation of Party structures in this way, it is hardly surprising that, since Blair became Leader, great emphasis has been placed on recruiting new members.⁵ In 1995 membership of the Party increased by twenty per cent (Labour Party, 1996a), and now stands at over four hundred-thousand. Given that most new members are relatively inactive, there is less likelihood of a strong activist membership being in conflict with agents in the Leadership. As McSmith points out, "Blair's not-so-secret weapon is that he can appeal over the heads of activists to the membership at large, who in effect are just voters with party cards" (1996: 361).

In the case of parliamentary selection, there has been further centralisation of power towards the Party Leadership in London. Under Blair a number of prospective parliamentary candidates have been denied selection, despite the backing of the CLP, solely because they did not meet the approval of the Leadership.⁶ Once again therefore, agents in the Leadership have taken steps to minimise dissenting voices in the Party's organisational structures in order to present a united and moderate front to the electorate.

More recent proposals to reform organisational structures have been designed to avoid the conflicts of the seventies between Labour governments and the Party at large. In January 1997 the NEC agreed, in the confidently titled *Labour into Power: A Framework for Partnership*, to propose changes to the compositions and roles of both the NEC itself and the Party Conference. It is intended that the Conference will become more "presentational" in form, rather than a forum for making Party policy as is the case (theoretically, at least) at present. The NEC will also meet less frequently, its importance is to be reduced, and its membership will change dramatically (*The Guardian*, 1/30/97). However, whilst the reforms are intended to 'boost party democracy', it has been argued by opponents of the reforms that the real purpose is to strengthen the Leadership and

⁵ There is also academic evidence to suggest that a larger (active) membership will increase votes for the Party at general elections. According to Seyd and Whiteley's analysis, if Labour had recruited one-hundred new active members in every constituency prior to the 1987 election, this may have added another five percentage points to Labour's overall share of the vote (1992: 197-8). Schemes to recruit new members have included increasing the frequency of newspaper adverts which include membership forms. Any literature existing members receive are almost invariably accompanied by 'recruitment packs' and encouragement to recruit friends or colleagues. Moreover, the membership department at John Smith House has also become more efficient using modern technology, and the procedures for joining the Party have been simplified.

⁶ See McSmith, 1996: 350 for specific cases.

neutralise still further the residual influence of the left. Tony Benn described the reforms as “the Americanisation of the Labour Party in which the Conference would become a rally for the Leadership” (*The Times*, 1/30/97).

In the PLP, there are also signs that the Leadership is tightening discipline in the Commons, so that the Party is not damaged by backbench dissent whilst in government. New disciplinary procedures have been introduced to lessen the scope for internal conflict, and to increase the penalties for dissent (*Fabian Review*, 109(1):14). There is some academic evidence to suggest that there may be good reason for such moves. In *Blair’s Bastards: Discontent Within the Parliamentary Labour Party* (1996),⁷ Philip Cowley and Philip Norton examine recent backbench voting behaviour for any indication that dissent may be a problem for a future Labour government. They argue that “judging from their [i.e., backbenchers’] current voting behaviour, there is the real possibility that any future Labour Government will face significant backbench discontent” (1996: 3).

In summary, in the period since 1992 the modernisation of organisational structures continued under John Smith and Tony Blair. Since 1994 there have been fewer changes to organisational structures in comparison to the changes made under Kinnock, as attention has shifted towards further reforms to policy and image structures (as will be discussed below). This is simply because most of the foundations for a party characterised by strong central control had already been laid by Kinnock, so that aside from Smith’s OMOV reforms, later changes have been met with less protest. Opponents of reforms are now less powerful not only because structures have been transformed in order to facilitate agents in the Leadership, but also because, after four consecutive election defeats, many opponents of the Leadership are simply more prepared to refrain from the factional struggles which characterised the party in the early eighties, in the interests of Party unity and electoral success. The danger for the Labour Leadership, as Cowley and Norton suggest, may be that if Labour wins the 1997 election the need to maintain unity will disappear and factional disputes will arise again.⁸ In this respect however, agents in the Leadership seem to be pre-empting such a phenomenon by transforming the structures of the Party even before the opportunity for dissent arises.

⁷ The title is a reference to John Major’s description of some of his ‘Euroceptical’ backbench critics, made to the ITN journalist Michael Brunson when he thought the camera was not recording. It was, however, and the tape was subsequently leaked to the rest of the media.

⁸ Indeed, if Labour wins by a landslide, the problem of dissent in the PLP may increase, as there would be less need to maintain tight discipline in the Commons’ division lobbies. Thus, a medium-sized working majority would probably be preferable to the Party Leaders and Whips.

ii. Policy and Policy-making Structures

Towards the end of Neil Kinnock's Leadership of the Party, plans were introduced to reform Labour's policy-making structures. Under the structure in place at that time, the chief policy-making body was of course the Party Conference. Policy could be formulated by the NEC, but there were also opportunities for resolutions to be submitted by CLPs and trade unions, which could be amended by 'composites' (i.e., a series of amendments collected in one resolution) before being put to a vote of all delegates, which in turn was dominated by the trade union block votes. This often meant that major decisions on Party policy were taken without wider consultation either with the Party at large or with those who may have been affected by policy changes. As an example of the speed with which important decisions were made, Mandelson and Liddle note that the debate which changed Labour's policy to that of favouring withdrawal from the European Economic Community in 1980 lasted less than thirty minutes, with only nine speakers participating in the debate (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996: 221; *RACLP 1980*: 125-32).

Thus, in 1990 the NEC proposed establishing "a National Policy Forum, with some 200 members, representing all aspects of the work of the party; a number of standing commissions on each of the main policy areas; and a 'rolling programme' of policy, with a two-year cycle of policy development" (Labour Party, 1992c: 27). The aim of the Policy Forum was to create a body which gave underrepresented sections of the Party (e.g., women, ethnic minorities, local government representatives, etc.) a greater role in policy-making in a more deliberative environment, so that policies could be more effectively formulated prior to them being put before Conference.

Following the 1992 election defeat, however, these proposals were modified in the document titled, *Agenda for Change* (1992c). Given the Party's rather precarious financial situation at the time, it was decided that a more 'evolutionary' approach should be adopted. The size of the Policy Forum was scaled down to only one-hundred members, which was to be headed by a Joint Policy Committee comprising of equal numbers of NEC and Shadow Cabinet members. This committee was to be chaired by the Party Leader (1992c: 28). After deliberating the body would then present policy proposals to be considered by the Annual Conference. The plans for a 'rolling programme' were dropped.

Although these changes were fairly substantial in themselves, the decision to back down from wholesale changes, whilst obviously a result of financial constraints, was characteristic of John Smith's leadership style more generally. His approach was what he referred to as 'playing the long game'; in other words, he saw no need to create unnecessary tension in the Party by changing everything at once: instead, a more patient and gradual process of modernisation could be carried out with fewer potential obstacles arising along the way. On the whole, this strategy was successful at allowing Smith to continue to transform internal structures -- in this case, extending the consultative process to a wider body of the Party, whilst retaining (through the Joint Policy

Committee) overall control of the policy making structures -- without incurring the wrath of Party activists or left-wingers. But there should be no doubt that the aim of the reforms was to transform structures to give agents in the Leadership more direct control over policy. As two of the leading 'modernisers' later observed:

The old days of the party deciding by a quick show of hands to set off on a completely different -- and often totally impractical -- road from the parliamentary leadership are, thankfully, over. Labour now prepares for government as a cohesive party should: testing ideas, forging new policies, and trying them out on those who will be involved in implementing them. (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996: 222.)

The *Labour into Power* proposals discussed in the section above appear to represent the logical conclusion to the process originally adumbrated in *Agenda for Change*. The Joint Policy Committee is to be revitalised and given a greater role in formulating policy than it had before. The National Policy Forum is also to be reorganised and expanded, in order to increase the so-called 'stakeholding' principle within the Party itself. The plans for a two-year rolling policy programme have been revived, whilst the policy-making role of the Conference -- which Hugo Young called "the most sentimentalised shrine in the entire political landscape" -- is to be changed so that it will eventually become a forum for discussing, rather than initiating, policy (*The Guardian*, 1/30/97). Ironically, it appears that the Labour Party Conference may come to resemble the Conservative Party Conference, which was often criticised by Labour Party members for its stage-managed shows of loyalty to the Conservative Party Leadership and a lack of any substantive powers. Whether the proposals (now at the 'consultation' stage) lead to another conflict between the Leadership and the Party at large once the election campaign is over remains to be seen.

The policies which have emerged in the last five years are indicative of the rightward direction in which the Leadership has continued to take the Party. The 'draft manifesto', *New Labour New Life for Britain*, published in 1996 and approved by ninety-five per cent of Party members participating in a ballot, set forth the main aspects of Labour's programme, most of which featured in the more detailed 1997 election manifesto, *New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better* (1997). At around sixteen-thousand words it is Labour's longest manifesto since 1983. However, any similarities between the two documents end there.

Labour's policy reforms have attempted to address the areas in which it traditionally performed badly in comparison to the Conservative Party, specifically: taxation and public spending, law and order, industrial relations and privatisation. In the area of taxation, Labour was heavily criticised in 1992 for its commitment to introducing a new top rate of income tax of fifty per cent on incomes over £40,000 per annum. Reforms were promised in the area of National Insurance contributions, which would similarly affect those on higher incomes (Labour Party, 1992: 12). In contrast, the current policy position is more conservative fiscally, reflecting the new paradigm of

striving for lower levels of personal taxation and public spending. The 1997 manifesto sets out ten pledges to British voters -- a "contract with the people" -- the second of which is that "there will be no increases in the basic or top rates of income tax" (Labour Party, 1997). Indeed, the Party's long-term goal is to introduce a new starting rate of only ten per cent (the current lower rate is twenty per cent). Moreover, an incoming Labour government also intends to retain the departmental spending limits drawn up by the current Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ken Clarke, effectively ruling out greater levels of public expenditure, and hence taxation. Finally, in an attempt to dispel the perception that Labour is a 'tax and spend' party, current fiscal policy is to "enforce the 'golden rule' of public spending -- over the economic cycle [Labour] will only borrow to invest and not to fund current expenditure" (Labour Party, 1996: 12).

On crime, another policy area which has traditionally been the domain of the Conservatives, Labour's policies have also moved sharply to the right. Under the now famous slogan coined by Blair when he was the Shadow Home Secretary, Labour promises to be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime," with a particularly hard-line "zero-tolerance" approach to be taken to with juveniles and young offenders; the new manifesto also pledges to appoint a 'drug czar' to tackle the problem of drug trafficking.

With regards to employment issues there remain considerable differences between the two parties, centred around Labour's proposals to introduce a national minimum wage and to sign the European Social Charter on social policy. However, Labour has promised, in addition to its 1992 pledge not to repeal Conservative industrial relations legislation, only "fairness, not favours" in its dealings with trade unions, reflecting its more explicitly pro-business approach to policy.

Having dropped all remaining commitments to re-nationalise privatised industries, Labour's new plans are geared towards creating a 'stakeholder' economy and society, where everyone has a stake in, and a responsibility to, Britain's overall prosperity.⁹ Rejecting the *dirigiste* and *laissez-faire* approaches of both "the old left and new right" (Labour Party, 1996: 5), Labour remains enthusiastically committed to the free market whilst promoting partnership between the public and private sectors. During the 1997 campaign however, there are signs that the Party Leadership is adopting an even more pronounced pro-market stance. The Labour Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown is expected to announce that Labour will consider selling off more public assets to finance expenditure, whilst Tony Blair stated, in a keynote speech to business leaders, that:

⁹ The concept of a 'stakeholder' society has become a fashionable concept amongst economists and politicians on the left and centre-left who are attempting to mount a credible challenge to the current New Right orthodoxy whilst avoiding the failings of old-style Keynesianism. The idea of a stakeholder society is explicitly fleshed out in, for example, Will Hutton's *The State We're In* (1996), although it is important to point out that Tony Blair's definition of stakeholding is less radical and more vague than Hutton's.

I certainly believe that where there is no overriding reason for preferring the public provision of goods and services, particularly where those services operate in a competitive market, then the presumption should be that economic activity is best left to the private sector, with market forces being fully encouraged to operate. ... It is the public interest that is important. As we have made clear in our manifesto, what counts is what works. (Labour Party Press Release, 4/7/97.)¹⁰

Labour's traditional commitment to the redistribution of wealth has also been formally dropped in recent months. David Blunkett, a former leading member of the 'soft' left, stated in a February 1997 speech that "any government entering the 21st Century cannot hope to create a more equal or egalitarian society simply by taking money from one set of people and redistributing it to others" (*Daily Telegraph*, 2/22/97). Whilst much was made at the time of the fact that Labour's 1992 manifesto failed to mention *socialism* at any point, no-one was surprised in the least when it was once again omitted from *New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better*.

In summary, Labour's policies have now shifted so far to the right (relative to the pre-Policy Review era) that in many areas there are very few discernable differences between the Labour and Conservative manifesto pledges. It would be exaggerating to claim, however (as some on both the left and right have, for example), that the two parties are now indistinguishable: Labour's policies on education, and especially constitutional reform vary considerably from the current government's proposals.¹¹ In a clear reaction to charges that the Party was irresponsible with its manifesto plans in the past, the 1997 manifesto is very cautious. At the manifesto's launch, Tony Blair said that "we make a virtue of the fact that our manifesto does not promise the earth. ... We do so by promising only what we are sure we can deliver" (Labour Party Press Release, 4/3/97). Nevertheless, it is testament to the Leadership's control over policy-making structures that such a pro-market, pro-business, and socially conservative manifesto could be published with almost no public dissent from the left and liberal wings of the Party.

The assumption made in this framework is that agents will act to transform Party structures in the hope that this will lead to electoral success for the Party at the next general election. According to a Gallup poll taken in December 1996, there are indications that the policy initiatives and reforms of the last five years have had some success in this respect.

In the areas where polling data suggested that Labour was weakest in 1992 -- industrial relations, inflation, taxation, and law and order -- Table 4.1 shows that substantial gains have been made by Labour, so that in each case the Party is now thought to have the best policies to tackle the

¹⁰ This statement appears to go beyond even the longstanding totem of the German SPD: "Competition as far as possible -- planning as far as necessary" (SPD, 1990: 40).

¹¹ On Labour's constitutional proposals, see Tony Blair's article in *The Economist*, 9/14/96.

problems at hand. Labour has also been able to benefit from the fact that although it has shifted considerably to the right in recent years, there are no credible parties on its left that may attract disillusioned left-wing voters (with the notable exception of the Scottish National Party in Scotland). The corresponding shift to the right by the Conservatives (particularly over the issue of European integration), on the other hand, has seen many of its centrist supporters switch their allegiances to the Liberal Democrats, and even the Labour Party itself.

Table 4.1: Respondents' Perceptions of Which Party Has Best Policies, 1992-96 (Figures show percentage lead)¹²

<i>Policy Area</i>	April 1992	Dec. 1996	Labour gain
Britain's defence	Con 30	Con 9	+21
Relations with Europe	Con 20	Lab 17	+37
Strikes, industrial disputes	Con 18	Lab 14	+32
Inflation, prices	Con 15	Lab 3	+18
Taxation	Con 12	Lab 17	+29
Law and Order	Con 12	Lab 14	+26
Environment	Lab 4	Lab 24	+20
Education, schools	Lab 14	Lab 41	+27
Status of women	Lab 15	Lab 44	+29
Pensions	Lab 18	Lab 43	+25
Public Transport	Lab 21	Lab 47	+26
Unemployment	Lab 22	Lab 48	+26
National Health Service	Lab 25	Lab 52	+ 27
Homelessness	Lab 26	Lab 54	+26

¹² Source: Gallup Poll for the *Daily Telegraph*, 12/9/96.

iii. New Labour: From Socialism to Social-ism

In opposition, the Labour Party is compelled, by the nature of the class struggle, to take up an alignment which hamstrings it in office. A party climbing to power by articulating the demands of the dispossessed must always wear a predatory visage to the property-owning class ... although all the time its heart is tender with the promise of peaceful gradualism. It knows that the limited vision of the workers will behold only its outward appearance, but it hopes that the gods of private enterprise will look upon its heart. In either case, one must be deceived. To satisfy the workers the Labour Party must fulfil the threat of its face, and so destroy the political conditions necessary to economic gradualism. To calm the fears of private enterprise it must betray its promise to the workers, and so lose their support.

-- Aneurin Bevan.¹³

Nye Bevan's reflection on the dilemma facing the Labour Party under Ramsay MacDonald in the twenties remains remarkably apposite today, despite the anachronistic rhetoric of the class struggle. It has been shown above how policy and policy-making structures have been transformed to facilitate the Leadership's goal of assuaging the fears of business leaders, not to mention those of a large portion of the electorate, in the pursuit of electoral success. Under Tony Blair's Leadership, the identity structures of the Party have also been transformed to this end.

The motives behind changing the identity structure of the Labour Party in recent years have arguably been twofold. In the first instance the purpose of the whole modernisation project can be seen as an attempt to transform the internal culture of the Party in the hope that it would give the Party a clearly defined sense of purpose -- something that Labour has never had in its history due to the uneasy combination of various strands of British socialist thought, ranging from quasi-Marxism to Christian socialism. Thus, if the debate over what Labour stands for could be ended, the old divisions between the left and social democratic wings of the Party would perhaps become a thing of the past.

The more plausible interpretation, however, though related to the first, can be understood in more pragmatic electoral terms. It is true that factional and ideological divisions present an image of disunity to the electorate, but often the arguments on either side appear obscure and largely irrelevant to everyday issues. If the electorate is intending to elect the Party to government, it is more likely to be interested in how the Party intends to remedy the perceived maladies of the state. Therefore, creating an identity which is electorally attractive is at least as important as one that is internally cohesive.

¹³ Quoted in Coates, 1996: 76.

Like most parties of the left in Western Europe, the Labour Party has had to adapt to the changing historical context in which it has found itself. Despite the deficiencies of the New Right ideology championed by Thatcher, it is undeniable that it represented the economic and political orthodoxy of the last two decades. Following the failure of post-war Keynesianism in the seventies, the collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to deliver a fatal blow to state socialism and any form of even limited central planning. In this context, Labour and other leftist parties have struggled to remain ideologically relevant.

Since he became Leader in 1994, Tony Blair has attempted to give the new direction the Party has undertaken some philosophical underpinnings. Using the resources available to him as Party Leader -- the publicity he receives, the access to news media and invitations to deliver public lectures, etc. -- Blair has sought to entrench the Party's values and core beliefs in a form of socialism which eschews economic planning and statism more generally.

In a highly publicised Fabian Society pamphlet, *Socialism* (1994), Blair traced what he saw as the two principal stands of thought in British socialism: a form of scientific Marxism, and ethical socialism (1994: 2). Although never a Marxist party, elements of Marxism, particularly its economic determinism, have influenced the Party at various times. On the other hand, ethical socialism has also influenced the Party, emphasising the need for community and social justice. This view has most commonly been associated with Christian socialism and especially the writings of R. H. Tawney.¹⁴

Given the collapse of communism, Blair claimed that it was no longer viable to argue for socialism as understood in economic terms, and therefore ethical socialism was "the only serious view of the Left's future that can remain" (1994: 2-3). He went on:

...socialism as defined by certain key values and beliefs is not merely alive, it has a historic opportunity now to give leadership. The basis of such socialism lies in its view that individuals are socially interdependent human beings -- that individuals cannot be divorced from the society to which they belong. *It is, if you will, social-ism.* (1994: 4; emphasis added.)

Such a definition was clearly compatible with Blair's (and the late John Smith's) well-known Christian beliefs. However, 'social-ism' did not rest so easily with Clause IV, Section 4 of the Labour Party Constitution, which called for "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange". Although, as a political prescription it was essentially meaningless -- no Labour government ever sought to put it into practice (only Atlee's 1945-51 administration came close) -- Clause IV had tremendous symbolic (not to mention sentimental) value to Labour Party members. More worrisome for the modernisers, however, was that it also gave Labour's

¹⁴ On Tawney, see Wright (1987).

opponents the opportunity to label Labour as a party of central planning and state socialism, long after the Policy Review and the collapse of the Soviet bloc. As long as Clause IV remained “the formal expression of Labour’s socialist myth” (Jones, 1996: 41), therefore, the Labour leadership was constrained in two ways: first, Clause IV represented a shibboleth which the left and traditionalists could cling to as a justification for opposing the rightward shift of the Party, and second, it represented an Achilles heel in debates with political opponents from other parties and interest groups (e.g., the CBI).

In his first speech at a Party Conference as Leader, Blair subtly indicated that he would attempt to consign Clause IV to history. Without referring directly to Clause IV, he called for “a modern constitution that says what we are in terms the public cannot misunderstand and the Tories cannot misrepresent” (quoted in Jones, 1996: 139). Once it became clear what Blair was intending to do, the Party was presented with another potentially divisive internal struggle.

It is clear that the decision to attempt to alter the Party’s identity (not to mention its constitution) in this way was a considerable gamble taken by agents in the Party Leadership, one for which there was a discouraging precedent. Following the 1959 general election defeat, the then Leader Hugh Gaitskill, with the support of fellow ‘revisionists’ such as Anthony Crosland, attempted to alter Clause IV, which, he felt, confused socialist means with ends. At a time when other socialist parties throughout Western Europe were revising their basic programmes, however (the SPD’s famous Bad Godesberg apostasy being the most notable example), Gaitskill’s plans had to be dropped when it became clear that he faced certain defeat at the 1960 Party Conference (Jones, 1996: 41-64).

However, Blair took advantage of the resources available to him as Party Leader -- in effect taking advantage of one set of structural ‘rules and resources’ to facilitate the transformation of another structure -- to maximise his chances of success. First, he ensured that he would control the agenda of the debate, so that the final choice over the wording of Clause IV would be between the original clause and a new one drafted by himself and his allies. Second, during the consultation period in which all CLPs and affiliated organisations were asked to contribute to the debate, the Leadership produced, and distributed to all members, *Labour’s Objects: Socialist Values in the Modern World* (1995a), which argued that the seventy-six year-old Clause IV was no longer relevant to the modern era; third, he recommended that CLPs should ballot *all* of their members, again appealing over the heads of activists to the wider membership; and finally, Blair led an expensive ‘pro-change’ campaign by personally touring the country, meeting an estimated thirty-thousand members in “a massive and unprecedented exercise in persuasion” (Shaw, 1996: 199).

Given the vast amount of publicity accorded to Blair and his campaign, opposition to the abolition of Clause IV (which was particularly strong in traditionally working class areas in Scotland and the north-east of England) had little chance of success. Moreover, as with the debate over the

trade union links when Smith was Leader, the final ballot was seen as a vote of confidence in Blair.

The new statement of aims and values contained in Clause IV of the Party Constitution, which was adopted at a special Conference in April 1995 with the support of two-thirds of all votes and ninety per cent of CLPs (Shaw, 1996: 200), was clearly influenced by Hattersley and Kinnock's earlier *Democratic Socialist Aims and Values*. The first section, which has replaced the original Clause IV(4) on the back of Party membership cards, now reads:

The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few, where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe, and where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.¹⁵

The revised Clause IV of the Party Constitution also calls for "a dynamic economy, serving the public interest, in which the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition are joined with the forces of partnership and co-operation" (Labour Party, 1996b: 4). Thus, thirty-six years after Gaitskill's aborted attempt, Labour experienced its own 'Bad Godesberg', where the identity structure of the Party was formally transformed to bring it into line with both the realities of existing Party policy, and the mainstream of continental European social democracy. Tony Wright's assessment of the 'new socialism' of the Labour Party highlights the crucial role of agency in the Party Leadership:

... the battle of ideas was now not only central to the party but driven from the top. The Blairite revolution, converting socialism into 'social-ism' and constructing a liberal communitarianism anchored in a broad intellectual inheritance of the left centre, succeeded where the putative revisionism of a generation earlier had failed. ... On any test it was a decisive and defining moment for the British Left, both politically and intellectually, with a significance for socialism that went wider still. (Wright, 1996: 135-6.)

¹⁵ Cf. the even more anodyne opening statement in the SPD's 1989 Berlin Programme, under the heading *What We Want*:

We Social Democrats, men and women, are struggling for a peaceful world with a viable nature, for a humane and socially just society. We want to maintain what is worth preserving, avert all risks to life and encourage people to fight for and achieve progress.
We want peace. (SPD, 1990: 5.)

The final element of the transformation of Labour's identity concerns the Party's name. At the special Conference in 1995 which altered Clause IV, Blair joked in his speech about changing the Party name, before reassuring worried delegates that it was to remain as it is. In truth, however, whilst the formal name remains the same, it has increasingly been displaced in both speeches and in print by the name 'New Labour' -- with the word 'new' almost always capitalised for emphasis (see, e.g., Labour Party, 1996, 1997; Mandelson and Liddle, 1996).¹⁶

'New Labour' is most often characterised in terms of what it is not: it is not the Party of old-style Clause IV nationalisation, of state socialism, or of narrow class-based sectarianism. In short, it is not 'Old Labour'. It is rather disingenuous to suggest that the Labour Party was any of these things for the majority of its post-war history, but that is almost beside the point.¹⁷ By creating the myth of 'Old Labour' with which to contrast 'New Labour', "the past was recreated to serve the present's strategic needs" (Shaw, 1996: 217). The primary target of this strategy was the electorate -- Labour's image had to be improved if it was to secure the trust of the voters -- but the transformation of the Party's identity served a useful purpose for agents in the Leadership internally as well. Policy and presentational changes are easier to justify to a mass membership (a large portion of which have only joined since 'New Labour' was thought of) if they are seen to represent the progress and modernity of 'New Labour' aiming to govern a 'New Britain'; the increased use of membership ballots also gives these members greater influence at the expense of CLP activists, who are invariably portrayed as 'Old Labour' personified. In other words, 'New Labour' provides a memorably convenient way of framing the terms of the debate in the Party: disputes are seen as being 'New' versus 'Old' Labour, and since 'New Labour' is always triumphant, the incentives for identifying oneself in the 'Old' camp are marginal.

When Tony Blair is now able to speak of having *created* 'New Labour' as he does in the introduction to the 1997 election manifesto, it must be said that to a large extent 'Old Labour' was his creation as well. Nevertheless, the fact that Blair is now comfortably able to refer to himself as a social democrat (which, *pace* the late John Smith, he regards as being indistinguishable from a democratic socialist), and his Party as both the party of "modern social democracy" and the "radical centre" (*Sunday Times*, 9/1/96) demonstrates the extent to which the identity of the Party has been transformed in the last twenty years. In 1981, after all, it was the subjective perceptions of whether one was a social democrat or a democratic socialist which influenced (on one level, at least) many MPs' decisions to leave Labour and form a new political party. Whilst Labour's identity once constrained Labour Leaders in their attempts to make the

¹⁶ The parallel with Bill Clinton's 'New Democrats' is not coincidental: in 1993 Blair and others had visited the United States to meet with those responsible for the Democrats' 1992 presidential campaign, and returned to Britain with a number of ideas on how the American experience could be applied to Britain. It is not unusual to hear observers speak of the 'Clintonisation' of the Labour Party in recent years, although the term is often used pejoratively.

¹⁷ For a more detailed critique of the concept of 'Old Labour', see Shaw, 1996: 206-17.

Party electorally successful, the culmination of the modernising project begun by Neil Kinnock has allowed Tony Blair to use Labour's new identity as a facilitating resource with which to attract new supporters.

In summary, the Labour Party in 1997 has continued to evolve into a highly centralised and more effective Party geared towards electoral success above almost everything else. The changes to organisational, policy-making and identity structures instigated by agents in the Leadership, particularly Tony Blair, have all been carried out with the goal of electoral success in mind. And it seems likely at the time of writing (April, 1997) that electoral success seems a real possibility: in the last few years Labour has had an average lead over the Conservative Party of approximately twenty-seven points in monthly opinion polls.¹⁸ It can be said that Blair has had more success controlling his Party than did Foot or Kinnock because he is more adept at negotiating internal structures: this is undoubtedly true to a large extent. But it is also true to say that he also benefitted from the reforms which were made before he became Leader, which along with four consecutive election defeats sapped the morale of the Leadership's opponents. Therefore, although the transformation of internal Party structures carried out in the last few years has been referred to by a number of observers (e.g., Mandelson and Liddle, 1996; Wright, 1996) as the 'Blair' or 'Blairite Revolution', it is clear that this revolution began long before Blair himself became Leader.

II. *External Structures*

i. Political Structures

In the period since 1992, there have been no major changes, or even the threat of change, to political structures. There were no changes to the nature of the British party system, and the failure of the Scottish National Party to win a significant proportion of seats at Westminster (despite winning nearly twenty-two per cent of the Scottish vote) left many Nationalists disillusioned and placed the issue of Scottish independence on the backburner. Despite all the pre-election speculation that Britain might be faced with a hung Parliament and thus some sort of coalition government, the 1992 result merely confirmed the *status quo*. Whilst this could hardly be regarded as an additional constraint on the Labour Party, aside from an additional (and unexpected) five years in opposition which reaffirmed the Conservatives' claim to be regarded as the natural party of government, it hardly appeared to be a facilitating factor either.

¹⁸ Source: MORI (<http://www.mori.com>). The average figure is based upon poll data from January 1994 through February 1997 produced in response to the question "How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?". Even if one allows for the tendency of opinion polls to slightly overestimate Labour's real popularity, the size of the lead remains remarkably high over an extended period.

Within six months, however, political events altered the terms of political debate in a fashion that eroded confidence in John Major's administration to the extent that it has never been fully recovered. On 'Black Wednesday' in September 1992, Britain was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, the system which loosely ties European currencies to the Deutschmark, following intense speculation in Sterling. The resulting devaluation of the pound was disastrous for the government, and its satisfaction rating in national opinion polls declined precipitously.

The issue of European integration has remained at the heart of British politics as the European Union's members move, at vary speeds, toward economic and monetary union. Of the three major political parties, only the Liberal Democrats appear unequivocally pro-European. Both the Conservatives and Labour have adopted more 'Eurosceptic' positions, although of the two Labour is more favourable towards aspects of European integration (such as the Social Chapter¹⁹ and the European Convention on Human Rights) which the Conservatives reject outright. Neither party, however, is prepared to commit itself to the single European currency, the 'euro', without first consulting the electorate in a referendum. Whilst Labour's 'Eurosceptic' backbenchers have not been silent by any means, they have undoubtedly been overshadowed by their counterparts in the Conservative Party, which has been experiencing the kind of public factional struggles which were characteristic of the Labour Party under Foot.

Major's apparently indecisive leadership, which has seen him struggle to contain the infighting in his party, led to a decline in his personal popularity, and he was only able to consolidate his position to an extent by resigning as party leader in the summer of 1995 in order to force a leadership contest where he defeated his right-wing, 'Eurosceptic' opponent John Redwood.

Since then, however, not only has the government continued to appear divided over the EU, but it has also faced criticism and controversy over its handling of the BSE beef crisis and the 'cash for questions' affair, which forced the resignation of two junior ministers after they admitted accepting bribes. The latter issue has continued to embarrass the Conservatives: John Major's decision to prorogue Parliament early before the report of the inquiry set up to investigate the matter could be published, and the refusal of one of the former ministers, Neil Hamilton, to stand down at the general election, have ensured that the issue of 'sleaze' has dominated the 1997 election campaign.

¹⁹ The Social Chapter is a protocol of the Maastricht Treaty related to Europe-wide social policy and especially employment legislation. Its most notable achievement to date has been requiring multinational firms to establish 'works councils' which involve employees' representatives in consultation (although the process falls well short of German *Mitbestimmung*). At present the British government has 'opted-out' from it, so the legislation applies to all EU states except Britain.

In political terms therefore, the Labour Party has not been presented with any alterations to political structures which severely undermined its chances of electoral success. Instead, at a time when the Party has become more moderate and electorate-friendly due to the internal changes outlined above, it appears that the actions of other political agents, such as the factions within the Conservative Party, have been of benefit to the Labour Party *qua* agent. As John Major has received the lowest approval ratings of any Prime Minister since opinion polling began, and the proportion of respondents who are dissatisfied with the government has fallen below seventy per cent only *once* since September 1992 (Source: MORI), it seems that Labour has been able to benefit simply from the fact that it is *not* the government and has not been in power for the last eighteen years.

ii. Socioeconomic Structures

The years since 1992 reinforce the by now familiar story of the declining size of the working class in Britain, Labour's traditional electoral base. The decline of British industry and manufacturing, and the growth of the globalised information society dependant upon white collar financial and service sectors over the last thirty years means that British political parties are now appealing to a largely post-industrial electorate. Table 4.2 charts the continuing decline of the working class (occupationally defined) since 1992. In the space of only four years the percentage of the workforce employed in traditional working class jobs (i.e., manual and agricultural labourers) declined from nearly thirty-six per cent to less than twenty-nine per cent of the workforce in 1995. Moreover, the size of the white-collar professional-managerial class, the salariat, increased to over twenty-eight per cent of the workforce in 1995. If these trends have continued to follow the same patterns in the last two years, it is reasonable to assume that in the 1997 election year there will be, for the first time, more managers and executives in the British labour market than there will be blue-collar workers.

It has been shown above that in the 1987-92 period following the Policy Review, Labour adopted policy positions which were less hostile to the growing middle class, dropping its commitments to re-nationalise privatised industries, and so on. In the years since 1992 this process has continued as Labour has shifted further to the right and has accepted most of the principles of the free-market economy. The irreversible decline of the working class and the globalisation of business has meant that, even if it so desired, a Labour government could not begin to change the structure of the British economy and by extension the occupational structures which it shapes; the effects on financial markets and the inevitably rapid capital flight from Britain would destroy the economy. However, there have of course been no indications that any Labour government has intended to do this in the last decade. Instead, the Party has embraced the business culture to the extent that in April 1997 it published a special election manifesto aimed *specifically* at business people, something which even the Conservative Party has never done. In it, the Party pledges to attempt to increase competition and free enterprise wherever possible, whilst guaranteeing that a Labour government would not impose on businesses the extensive labour costs and employee

benefits enjoyed by workers in other European states such as Germany. The Party also promises that it would keep levels of inflation as low as possible, and instead of previous commitments to full employment (traditionally regarded as incompatible with low levels of inflation), it has subtly altered its policy to that of striving for 'high and stable' levels of employment.

Table 4.2: Occupational Structures in Britain, 1992-1995 (Goldthorpe-Heath Schema, percentages)²⁰

<i>Classification</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>
Salariat	25.4	25.1	29.7	28.2
Routine non-manual	23.4	22.5	23.2	22.0
Petty bourgeoisie	6.8	9.6	8.4	9.0
Manual foremen	4.7	8.8	7.7	7.5
Working class	35.8	32.4	30.4	28.7
Never had job	3.1	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	2.8
Not classified/insufficient info	0.7	1.6	0.7	1.8
<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>(N)</i>	(3534)	(2836)	(3378)	(3633)

This extensive exercise in reassurance represents an advance on the strategies adopted by the Labour Party in recent decades. Given the changed economic circumstances, it is now vital that the Party convinces the business community that a Labour government would not be harmful to its interests. Whilst it has attempted this before, under Blair the Party seems to have had a considerable degree of success which has eluded it in the past.

The only possible drawback of such a strategic approach to the changing occupational structure of the British electorate is that, as Bevan suggested, the Party risks appearing to betray its traditional supporters. This may be true, but the consequences in terms of an impact on Labour's electoral support appear increasingly minimal. Lacking any credible alternatives to the left of the

²⁰ Sources: 1992 British Election Study, British Social Attitudes surveys, 1993-5 (the latest years available). I am grateful to Katarina Thomson at Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) for providing me with the data from the BSA surveys.

Labour Party at the national level, potentially disaffected Labour voters simply have nowhere else to go.

iii. Media and Communications Structures

If the Conservative Party is to stage a spectacular comeback and win the 1997 general election, it is highly unlikely that anyone will claim that it was '*The Sun* wot won it' for John Major's party. In the years since 1992 the Conservative press has turned against the government and the Prime Minister, attacking their weak leadership and especially their failure to adopt a more unequivocal anti-European stance. Several newspaper editors appear to long for the days when their heroine Margaret Thatcher led the party, and have often contrasted her strong leadership with Major's perceived incompetence. But is this good news for the Labour Party, which has often complained of the media bias against it?

At this juncture, the answer is uncertain. Inasmuch as the traditionally Conservative press has deserted Major's government, it is because it tends to favour a more *right-wing* government rather than due to any infatuation with Tony Blair's 'New Labour'. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that the structure of the British newspaper industry has changed in the last five years from being overwhelmingly pro-Conservative to being pro-Labour.

Nevertheless, there are signs that attempts by the Labour Party to attract more favourable coverage in the print media have, to a limited extent, produced favourable results. The Party's new approach to its relation with trade unions -- the *bêtes noires* of the Conservative newspaper industry -- and its decision to change Clause IV have been met with grudging admiration in several editorials. Labour's leading figures have also been invited to write articles in normally Conservative newspapers in order to argue their cases. Most significantly, in the summer of 1995 Tony Blair was invited to Australia address a conference held by Rupert Murdoch's News International corporation, which owns several British newspapers including *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*, and *The Sun*, in addition to the satellite broadcasting company Sky TV.²¹

When the 1997 general election was called in March, *The Sun* newspaper announced that it would be backing Tony Blair to win on May 1, although it remains suspicious of the Party he leads. Given *The Sun*'s attacks on Labour and Neil Kinnock in 1992 and 1987, this announcement became a major news story in its own right, with many column inches of type devoted to it. The editor of the right-wing *Daily Mail* announced that it would not be supporting any party at the election, and there are signs that the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Star* (both now owned by a Labour peer) may also fail to back the Conservatives. Whilst this may appear encouraging for

²¹ The thought of a Labour Party leader being invited to address a conference hosted by Rupert Murdoch would have been inconceivable under previous leaders. In the mid-eighties the Labour Party boycotted Murdoch's newspapers following the acrimonious industrial dispute at his company's Wapping printing plant.

Labour, particularly given the fact that *The Sun* is read by ten million people every day, it would be premature to suggest that it can rely on the votes of these newspapers' readers. Recent headlines in newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* suggest that some editors are having trouble coming to terms with their new-found 'neutrality'. References to trade union 'barons' and their supposed 'secret pacts' with the Labour Leadership suggest that Labour can still expect to receive negative coverage from the majority of the press (*The Guardian*, 4/4/97).

Moreover, there remain doubts as to the media's influence over its readership in the first place. John Curtice's analysis of BES panel data reveals that readers of normally loyal Conservative papers have noticed that the content of their newspapers has been more critical of the government since 1992, and this is the especially the case for the tabloid *Sun* (1996: 4). However, he maintains (following the argument set out in Curtice and Semetko, 1994) that observers of the media and politics in Britain should not overestimate the significance of such a change:

There is little evidence to suggest that either politicians or journalists themselves should be as preoccupied with the partisan tone of the press as they often appear to be. The changed tone of the Tory press since 1992 may have been entertaining for journalists and a source of some self-satisfaction for Labour's spin doctors. But it has not yet at least turned *The Sun* or any other traditionally Tory newspaper into a particularly rich source of Labour votes. (1996: 19.)

This view is shared to a certain extent by some journalists. As Roy Greenslade pointed out in *The Guardian*, "[it] would be extraordinarily naive to believe that the [*Sun*'s] 10 million readers will vote Labour just because the paper tells them to do so" (3/19/97). Nevertheless, it is clear that the media is able to influence the agenda of electoral campaigns: *The Guardian*'s dogged pursuit of allegations of corruption involving Conservative MPs has dominated much of the 1997 electoral campaign so far, to the obvious discomfort of the Conservative Party. Although readers do not blindly vote as their newspapers' editors tell them to, it is surely similarly naïve to believe that their evaluations of political events are not filtered through the media. Whilst the defection of *The Sun* to Tony Blair and the ambivalence (albeit temporary, perhaps) of the other Conservative newspapers may mean that Labour may not be subjected to the same amount of scare stories and vitriolic attacks it has previously experienced, then, it is not going to ensure that Labour wins the election. Labour's strategic manoeuvres, at best, have only minimised any potential negative impact caused by media structures; they have not transformed them.

As one might expect in the context of 'New' Labour's increasing attention to presentation and image, Party Political and Party Election Broadcasts have become more image-oriented, again placing emphasis on the contrasts between 'New' and 'Old' Labour. They are also being heavily targeted towards, naturally, the types of voters which Labour needs to attract to win the election. In the first PEB of the 1997 campaign, the entire content of the broadcast was aimed at business

people, aiming to convince them that Labour is the best party for British business. Indeed, Mark Lawson claims that the PEB closely resembles the style of a “corporate promotional video”:

We see a gleaming skyscraper shot from below, an aeroplane cresting its peak. As another disembodied voice declares that only one party understands what business needs, the pictures feature Gordon Brown [Labour’s Shadow Chancellor] leaning over some people working at a computer and then Tony Blair meeting car workers. Oddly, although New Labour is by far the least Marxist version of the Labour Party ever to be presented to the electorate, this sequence seemed irresistibly to call for the caption: “The General Secretary of the Supreme Soviet Discusses May Production Levels With Workers.” (*The Guardian*, 4/11/97.)

Finally, the Labour Party has also altered other aspects of its campaigning in response to advances in electronic news gathering. The Party has established its own Media Centre in Millbank Tower, just across the River Thames from Westminster, from where it is conducting the 1997 election campaign. This will eventually replace John Smith House (located further away in south London) as the Party Headquarters, so that press conferences and other presentations will be closer to the media correspondents based in central London. Labour has also established its own ‘rapid rebuttal unit’ designed to provide near instantaneous rebuttals of any negative stories emanating from either the press or Conservative Central Office. This has so far been effective in being able to quash many potentially damaging stories before they gain too much momentum which could be damaging to Labour’s image in the eyes of the electorate. Not coincidentally, the ‘rapid rebuttal unit’ was also put to good effect by Bill Clinton’s campaign team in the 1992 Presidential election, which Labour, it has already been observed, studied very carefully.

Summary

At the time of writing, with less than three weeks until the 1997 general election, Labour still holds a commanding lead in every opinion poll, and, in the absence of a spectacular comeback by the Conservatives or a major scandal involving Tony Blair, it is likely that it will win the election with either a comfortable majority or even a landslide.²² No one, it seems (save perhaps the most optimistic of Conservatives), seriously expects otherwise. Following the 1992 election, several commentators asked if Labour could *ever* win another general election. It seems that in 1997 Labour will never have a better opportunity to win, and if it fails to do so, then it might as well abandon the pursuit of power altogether.

²² Despite the expectations, it would still be a remarkable achievement if Labour was to win by such a margin. It requires a swing of more than four per cent from the Conservatives just to achieve a majority of one, and a swing of well over five per cent to secure a comfortable majority. No party has won with a swing of more than five per cent since Labour’s landslide victory in 1945.

Interpreting the internal history of the Labour Party during this period from a structure and agency perspective, highlights, to a certain extent, the triumph of agency over structures. Internally, the transformation and modernisation of Party structures have continued unabated. Neither Smith nor Blair have had to deal with the constraints which bedevilled Foot or (in the early period of his Leadership) Kinnock, in large part because of the structural transformations carried out under the aegis of Kinnock himself. This left them more time to concentrate on the business of trying to maximise Labour's electoral support. It must be said that they appear to have been successful in this respect, transforming organisational, policy-making, and identity structures all with the objective of creating an electorally viable and efficient 'catch-all' party, which can appeal to all classes and occupational interests.

The structure of the Party is now overwhelmingly that of an oligarchy, as power has been centralised towards a Leadership which in turn is backed by a large, and largely inactive, acquiescent membership, called upon from time to time to approve Leadership decisions. The contrast between the structural rules and resources available to Michael Foot, and Tony Blair is telling: the internal structures of the Party in the early eighties -- its intra-Party conflict, its extremist policies, and its unpopular and out-of-date image -- could hardly be regarded in any way as being resources which Foot and his Shadow Cabinet colleagues could draw upon in order to attract new voters. If anything, the exact opposite was the case, and the Leadership was clearly constrained by these internal structural factors. Tony Blair, on the other hand, now leads a Party in which each of the structures described above have been transformed to the extent that they are now unquestionably resources with which Blair is not only able to consolidate his own power and minimise dissent, but he is also able to point to them when presenting 'New Labour' to the electorate as a model of a modern disciplined party now capable of responsible government.

As far as external structures are concerned, whilst it would be wrong to say that the Labour Party *qua* agent has transformed structures, it has been able to benefit both from fewer constraining factors in comparison with earlier periods, and an improved ability to recognise and negotiate those constraints that remain. Labour is never going to be able to reverse the decline of the industrial working class in Britain, nor will it be able to (at least in a democratic society) change the nature of the media bias against it. By widening the nature of its appeal and taking a more conciliatory tone in its relations with the media, however, it can perhaps minimise the impact of these structures on its electoral performance. Whilst it has also benefitted from the unpopularity of the government, however, it must remember that it may encounter similar problems if and when it reaches office.

The experience of the 1992-1995 period seems to suggest that the nature of internal structural change is both incremental and cumulative: Blair's reforms would have been impossible without Kinnock's, and have been made easier by Labour's extended spell in opposition, which produced a Party more willing to accept change in return for the hope of electoral success. It also suggests that external structures are equally important, judging by Labour's actions with respect to

socioeconomic change and the media. That Labour has not been unduly harmed by political structures in the last five years, whilst the Conservative government has been beset by a number of problems is of particular interest, and highlights the value of avoiding a uni-dimensional interpretation of Labour's transformation. Lest anyone assume that Labour's seemingly inevitable victory on May 1 is due to the internal transformation of Labour alone, it is worthwhile to consider what the result may have been if John Major's government had *not* been so deeply unpopular: it is unlikely that the widely expected margin of victory, or indeed victory itself, would be so certain under those circumstances.²³ An account of Party change and its electoral consequences which only concentrated on the transformation of internal structures by agents in the Party rather than adopting the two-tiered, dialectical framework employed above, might have resulted in a more optimistic assessment of Labour's achievements in the last five years, but it would have ultimately failed to take account of external structural factors which still invite caution when assessing the long-term nature of Labour's electoral position.

²³ It is also clear that external structural factors are just as interrelated in many cases as internal structures. For example, if the government had not been so unpopular for political reasons, it is less likely that the normally pro-Conservative press would have turned against it, which in turn benefitted Labour in other ways.