

**The British Labour Party in Opposition, 1979-1997:
Structures, Agency, and Party Change**

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State
University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Political Science

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April 24, 1997
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: The Labour Party, Electoral Performance, Structure and Agency
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(ABSTRACT)

The British Labour Party has spent eighteen years in opposition since 1979. During that time it lost four consecutive general elections to the Conservative Party. In 1997, however, it now looks set to win its first election since 1974. This thesis examines the Labour Party in opposition since 1979, using a theoretical framework informed by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. Based on a dialectical notion of the structure and agency linkage, a two-tiered framework is constructed which at one level views a political party as consisting of a set of structures which can constrain and enable party leaders in their attempts to make the party electorally successful, and at another level the party is regarded as a collective agent in its own right, which in turn is subject to the effects of larger external structures. By comparing the strategies adopted by the Labour Party and its leaders since 1979, the thesis demonstrates that the apparent recovery in the Party's electoral fortunes has corresponded with an increase in the ability of agents to successfully negotiate structural constraints, whilst taking advantage of enabling structures. However, it is also clear that the transformation of Labour into an electorally viable party in 1997 is not solely the product of agency in the period since the last election; rather, it is the culmination of a longer-term process of party change.

The author gratefully acknowledges funding assistance in the form of a Graduate Research Development Project grant from the Graduate Student Assembly of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

*To my Mum and Dad,
with thanks*

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Charles Taylor, Rebecca Davis, and Stephen White for their helpful comments, suggestions and encouragement during the course of writing this thesis. Their feedback on earlier drafts undoubtedly clarified and focused my research, although, naturally, any errors which remain are my own responsibility.

I am also grateful to Freddie Harrison at the Labour Party library in John Smith House, and Giles Wright and Tina Howes at the Fabian Society, for providing me with desk space and access to their archives during the course of my research. Thanks are also due to John Curtice at Strathclyde University for answering my questions about the British Election Study datasets.

The faculty of the Department of Political Science at Virginia Tech made the transition to graduate school in a different culture a less taxing and more enjoyable experience. Special thanks go to Doug Borer for his encouragement, advice, and for providing me with a formidable opponent at darts. I would also like to say a big Thank You to the Political Science Department's secretaries, Maxine Riley and Kim Hedge, for answering with patience and good humour my inane questions about everything from my dealings with the university bureaucracy to the finer intricacies of the office photocopier. At Strathclyde, I am also indebted to Tom Mackie and David Marsh (now at Birmingham), who encouraged me to study on this side of the Atlantic in the first place.

Living and studying in Blacksburg was also made easier with the help of my colleagues in the M.A. Program here at Tech, who dealt admirably with my occasional bouts of thesis-related tetchiness. In particular, Phil Atkins and Bob Walsh deserve thanks for reading bits of my thesis, providing helpful suggestions, and for listening to me ramble on *ad nauseam* about the Labour Party, structure and agency, and Anthony Giddens.

In Scotland, my friends proved to be constant sources of encouragement, especially at times when I was questioning the wisdom of my decision to move to another country for an extended period of time. I also learned a lot from my friends and colleagues in the Cumbernauld & Kilsyth Constituency Labour Party, although not all of them will necessarily agree with what I have to say.

My greatest debts, however, are to my family. My sister and brother-in-law, Jane and Brian, have always been helpful and encouraging; if it was not for their son Calum's insistence on playing with his uncle, my research may have been completed much sooner, but my visits home would not have been as much fun. Should he or his new little brother, Jack, decide to study politics in their adult lives, I hope that they will not be able to write about a new period of the Labour Party in

opposition, and that their lives will be all the better for it. To my parents, Jean and Archie Allan, I owe a great deal for their continuous support in everything I have done, not least my decision to pursue a career in the rather precarious world of academia. Aside from all the other forms of support they have given me over the years, during the writing of this thesis they provided invaluable research assistance by sending me endless copies of newspapers and other Labour related documents. For this, and for everything else, I dedicate this thesis to them with thanks.