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# **Narratives of Organisational Reform in the British Labour Party, 1979-2014**

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**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

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**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**NARRATIVES OF ORGANISATIONAL REFORM IN THE BRITISH LABOUR  
PARTY, 1979-2014**

**ABSTRACT**

Party organisation is about more than structure and power: it is an important means through which political elites define a party and its political identity. This thesis examines narratives of organisational reform in the British Labour Party between 1979 and 2014, at times of significant debate about methods of leadership election, party governance, processes of policy-making and the union link. When arguing for particular kinds of organisational reform, elites within the Party have constructed different stories in order to contest proposals and present their visions for structural change. In doing so, they have tied together interpretations of Labour's past, present and future with particular notions of what makes for 'democratic' and 'legitimate' politics. This temporal and cultural politics lies at the heart of the transformation the Party underwent in this period and underpins the challenges posed to its identity in recent years.

In the course of this thesis, three related arguments are made. First, it is argued that the organisational debates that took place between 1979 and 2014 offer a unique perspective on the complicated and fractious identity politics of the Party as being historically rooted in collectivism or individualism, movement politics or parliamentarism. Second, it is argued that Labour's elites have increasingly sought to individualise party structures since the decline of the left in the '80s. In contrast to other accounts of Labour's organisation that focus on its structures, this thesis argues that this individualisation was as much about party identity as it was process. Third, this thesis argues that the prolonged debates about Labour's organisational identity demonstrate how unsettled and divided the Party has been throughout its recent history. The lack of a common sense understanding of the Party's organisational character can help to explain its fractured internal dynamics since its loss in the General Election of 2015.

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## **Contents**

List of Abbreviations.....	6
1. Introduction .....	7
2. Narratives and the Cultural Politics of Organisational Change .....	21
3. Labour’s Cultural and Organisational Politics.....	40
4. A Crisis of Identity: The Battle for the Labour Party Machine 1979-81 .....	59
5. Making Labour ‘Modern’: Organisational Reform and the Rise of Individualisation 1987-92 .....	87
6. Reimagining the Union Link: Party Reform 1992-3.....	117
7. Labour’s Cultural Turn: Partnership in Power 1994-97 .....	142
8. Remaking a Movement: ‘One Nation’ Politics and Party Reform 2010-15 .....	173
9. Conclusion .....	202
Bibliography.....	213

### **List of Abbreviations**

AEEU	Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CLPD	Campaign for Labour Party Democracy
CWU	Communication Workers Union
EEPTU	Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union
EPLP	European Parliamentary Labour Party
GMB	General, Municipal and Boilermakers Union
GMC	General Management Committee of the CLP (also known as GCs)
JPC	Joint Policy Committee
LCC	Labour Co-ordinating Committee
LHASC	Labour History Archive and Study Centre
MSF	Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union
NEC	National Executive Committee
NPF	National Policy Forum
NUPE	National Union of Public Employees
OMOV	One Member One Vote
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
SDP	Social Democratic Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TULRG	Trade Union Link Review Group
USDAW	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers

## **1. Introduction**

...organisation is at the root of change which a democratic socialist party especially has got to perpetually undertake. Not for chameleon reasons – quite the contrary – but because our duty is, whilst respecting and learning from the past, to address the present and to make a design – a practical design – for the future. In all that, organisation is fundamental.<sup>1</sup>

— Neil Kinnock, 2015

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, shortly after his improbable victory in his bid to replace Ed Miliband as Labour Leader, Jeremy Corbyn described how ‘the scale of Saturday’s vote is an unequivocal mandate for change from a democratic upsurge that has already become a social movement.’ In acknowledgement of this upsurge, and in reference to his own interpretation of Labour’s roots, he was clear in his view that ‘we will succeed by making a Labour a movement once more.’<sup>2</sup> In evoking this particular conception of the Party’s past, and its value for its present politics, Corbyn was engaging in the cultural and temporal politics that underpin Labour’s organisational identity. He was constructing a story about where Labour had once been, what it had lost, and what it needed to do to recover its organisational effectiveness for the future. In all of this, narrated connections between events – whether real or imagined – are essential.

This thesis is dedicated to the examination of Labour’s organisational past, from which both Corbyn’s own vision of a return to movement politics, and the mechanisms through which he was elected, sprung. Specifically, it sets out to examine how, through narratives, Labour’s elites have built visions of Labour’s organisational identity at key moments of organisational reform between 1979 and 2014. In doing so, it focuses on how the Party’s elites, who are essential to the conduct of organisational reform, tied particular notions of the Party’s history, its present circumstances and possible futures to ideas about what makes the Party ‘democratic’ or legitimate in the way that it is organised. Consequently,

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Lord Kinnock, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, ‘Britain Can’t Cut Its Way to Prosperity. We Have to Build it’, *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/13/jeremy-corbyn-labour-leadership-victory-vision> (Accessed 21<sup>st</sup> August 2017).

the analysis within this thesis allows us to better understand the competing visions of Labour's organisational form that have shaped its structures, defined its politics and been the source of conflicting ideas about the Party's identity in recent decades.

Arguments about the temporal and normative features of Labour's organisational structures at times of change are crucial to this construction of the Party's identity and its understandings of its place in the world surrounding it. Eric Hobsbawm once argued, albeit in terms that stretched well beyond the specifics of party politics, that collective identities are defined solely in the negative, premised on the need of a group to place itself in relief against an 'other' it has identified and characterised.<sup>3</sup> However, the debates around organisational change within Labour, and Labour's politics more broadly, make maintaining this argument difficult. Through arguments about how the Party should practise its politics, its elites have also made positive cases about what it means to be Labour and what the Party stands for. Just as 'no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind', no political parties imagine themselves to be coterminous with all of politics.<sup>4</sup> Even those, such as Labour, which have sought to mobilise broad electoral coalitions, have been concerned with constructing distinctive self-definitions for themselves, both inwardly and outwardly.

This is particularly true when we consider how both ideas about time and normative values have featured within the Party's broader identity politics. As an endeavour, politics is inseparable from time. Political success is so often dependent upon the capacity of politicians to articulate convincingly the past that underpins our present, and to project a popular vision for the future. Within British politics, this dynamic has been especially important to Labour, both because it is premised on building a future that is fundamentally different from the past (unlike its Conservative opponents) and because the past has been so important to the way that the Party describes and understands itself in this pursuit. In his 1979 work, Drucker observed that Labour's 'sense of its past is so central to its ethos that it plays a crucial role in defining what the Party is about to those in it'.<sup>5</sup> This sense of the past is not solely defined in relief against the Conservatives, but forged out of a drive to remember both the good and bad times that make up what it means to be Labour.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Identity Politics and the Left', *New Left Review*, 217, 1996, pp. 38-47.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London, Verso, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Henry M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979). p. 25.



Gareth Stedman Jones highlighted how a variety of ideological strands within the Party, on both its left and right, have harked back to the spirit of the 1945 Labour victory.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, Jon Lawrence has underscored how a variety of myths, from Labour's foundation and its mid-century 'golden age', to the 'betrayals' of the 1931 National Government and the departure of the Gang of Four in the early 1980s, have been central to the way party activists have built a sense of continuity in a party marked by distinctly different politics through its history.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, it is hard to ignore the way in which, at various points, Labour has drawn on particular conceptions of its ideological commitments, class relations and claims to be a 'progressive' political force in order to root its political identity in the past, present and future. Tudor Jones has highlighted how Gaitskell's early attempts to reform Labour's Clause IV were hotly contested as a result of the mythic importance of the Party's commitment to nationalisation as the defining feature of its socialism.<sup>8</sup> Recently, Emily Robinson has demonstrated how Labour has often claimed to be the 'progressive' party, attempting to use the term to project itself as the Party of forward movement in the face of various other claims to the label in British left and beyond.<sup>9</sup> These normative and temporal claims form a part of the means through which Labour defines itself.

Questions about how the Party itself is built, run and governed are at the heart of these issues of political identity. The way that parties organise themselves is intrinsically tied to issues of collective self-definition. In the context of British political party conferences, Florence Faucher-King has drawn attention to the importance of both language and practice to the way parties define themselves as communities.<sup>10</sup> More widely, whether in relation to methods of leadership election, candidate selection, policy-making or party governance, changes to these structures are presented, explained, justified, and often argued over by party elites. The ordering and linking of events, and the telling of stories

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<sup>6</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies of Working Class History 1832-1982*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983). p. 239.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'The Myths Labour Lives By', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). pp. 341-66.

<sup>8</sup> Tudor Jones, "'Taking Genesis Out of the Bible": Hugh Gaitskell, Clause IV and the Socialist Myth', *Contemporary British History*, 11:2, 1997, pp. 1-23.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Florence Faucher-King, *Changing Parties: An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

about organisational pasts, presents and futures, is central to this and important to the definition and redefinition of Labour's identity at times of change.

By exploring the way in which these narratives have differed between groups, and through time, at major moments of organisational change, we can trace how different visions of Labour's identity have developed and manifested within the Party and the consequences these have had for the Party's understanding of itself. In this vein, this thesis focuses on two central research questions:

- How have narratives of the British Labour Party's organisational identity developed between 1979 and 2014?
- What does this tell us about the changing ways in which elites have envisioned the Party?

In answering these questions, this thesis highlights the various conceptions of Labour's political identity that have been put forward by figures from its left and right. It underscores how these conceptions of the Party have been constructed in relation to ideas about legitimacy and democracy, or the Party as a movement or parliamentary force. Furthermore, it underlines how these debates about Labour's identity have been rooted within stories about the Party's history, its relationship with society and their corresponding futures. It also emphasises how these visions have shifted *through* time, as the Party's leaderships have successively emphasised the importance of conceiving of Labour's political practices as being dependent on the individual over and above collectivism. And, it stresses how, in all of this, the Labour Party has failed to develop a singular identity for itself as an organisation, often with dramatic consequences for its internal cohesion and capacity to present itself as united.

### **Labour's Journey 1979-2014: Party Transformation and Organisational Change**

In answering these central research questions, this thesis focuses on Labour's multiple episodes of major organisational reform between 1979 and 2014. Whilst this thesis is not concerned with providing a blow-by-blow account of organisational reform in the Party, or Labour Party change more broadly, it is useful to situate the following analysis within its broader context and to outline the series of transformations that have taken place since

the Party's defeat in 1979 up until 2014. Changes in party structure in these years took place within a wider context of party reform, from the ascendancy of Labour's left in the early 1980s, to the making of 'New' Labour and the Party's more recent break from 'New' Labour under Ed Miliband. The organisational changes focused on within this thesis are those substantial ones pertaining to processes of leadership election, candidate selection, policy-making, the Annual Conference and party governance. Central to all of these changes, and the debates that have surrounded them, have been questions about the involvement of trade unions within the politics of the Party. It analyses historically the elite narratives constructed in reference to five separate periods of organisational debate and reforms, and explores how these have developed. The five separate periods cover the years 1979 to 1981, 1987 to 1992, 1992 to 1993, 1994 to 1997 and 2010 to 2014.

Party organisation, and arguments about it, have always been at the heart of Labour's history and its internal politics. This is especially true when it comes to issues surrounding the relationship between the Party and its affiliated unions. Its formation as a party, as the political expression of trade unionism as the Labour Representation Committee, gave it a unique status within British politics as a party directly linked to organised labour. But this linkage, the distribution of power within the Party, and the capacity of this relationship to deliver political change have often been the subject of considerable debate and uncertainty. The decades preceding those considered within this thesis highlight the pre-existence of these tensions and the importance that different interpretations of Labour's mission and its union roots have played not just in battles about internal power, but in arguments about Labour's identity and what it was founded to achieve.

In the 1960s, concerns about the capacity of 'labourism' to deliver Labour back to office and meet the needs of the times underpinned Harold Wilson's push to 'modernise' Labour's platform.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, critiques of 'labourism' and the capacity of the Labour Party to deliver a meaningful socialist transformation also emerged within the New Left, as figures like Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn argued that the exceptional nature of British class politics and the organisational form of the left's political standard bearer had crippled its capacity to achieve authentically socialist politics.<sup>12</sup> Interwoven within these

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<sup>11</sup> See Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour*. (London, Verso, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> For an effective summary of this debate, see Mark Wickham-Jones, 'An Exceptional Comrade? The Nairn-Anderson Interpretation', in John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam (eds.) *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003). pp. 86-100.

battles over Labour's goals and form, arguments about the consequence of Labour's relationship with the state, and the degree to which it should centre itself on parliamentary activity had also been underway throughout the post-war period. As part of his consistent criticism of Labour's politics and British democracy in the post-war period, Richard Crossman argued in 1960 that the accrual of power amongst leading trade unionists and Labour's leadership threatened the capacity of the Party to bring about a sweeping shift in the balance of power in the country.<sup>13</sup> Against this, Anthony Crosland was arguing that parliament should form the heart of Labour's ameliorating platform.<sup>14</sup> Later, in his assessment of Labour's commitment to parliament, Ralph Miliband condemned the capacity of a 'labourist' coalition of trade unions and centrist Labour leaderships to deliver real socialism in Britain.<sup>15</sup> All of these issues form the ideational and intellectual backdrop from which the organisational debates that took place in the Party after 1979 emerged. From this point onwards, the centrality of Labour's organisational battles and their relationship with these more fundamental questions formed a substantial focus as successive party leaderships sought to redefine the Party's organisational identity by reforming its practices.

Between 1979 and 1981, the Party went through a series of transformations, largely in the hands of the Party's left, amidst rancorous infighting over the conduct of the Labour governments of the 1970s and the beginning of the Thatcher governments. In the early 1980s, the Party's left, aided by a sympathetic Leader in Michael Foot, were increasingly confident in asserting their wish for a more forthrightly socialist party. This included commitments to drastically increasing national spending, expanding public services, and democratising industry.<sup>16</sup> In terms of party organisation, after the election loss of 1979, Benn and the Labour left, along with the trade unions, secured the introduction of mandatory reselection for all sitting Labour MPs. By 1981, an Electoral College for electing the Leader and Deputy Leader had been agreed, in which the trade unions would hold 40% of votes, with 30% each to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the constituency parties. They also attempted to secure control of the manifesto for the National Executive Committee (NEC) but were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, these reforms shifted significantly the power that activists had in shaping the tenure of their selected

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Crossman, *Socialism and the New Despotism*. (London, Fabian Society, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*. (London, Cape, 1956).

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*. (London, Merlin, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> See *New Hope for Britain*. (London, Labour Party, 1983).

MP and removed the sole right of the PLP to determine its Leader.<sup>17</sup> These shifts in party platform and organisation came at the height of the influence of the Labour left. In the following decades, they found themselves increasingly marginalised.

The next key set of organisational reforms did not come until 1987. Following the heavy General Election defeat of 1983, Neil Kinnock was elected Leader. After a failed attempt to secure the right of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) to use voluntarily One Member One Vote (OMOV) to select candidates in 1984, he and his team largely focused on navigating the difficult context of the miners' strike and dealing with the infiltration of the Party by Militant. After Labour had lost its second successive election, Kinnock remained Leader and was intent on 'modernising' the Party in platform and practice. A swathe of changes were secured in the way that candidates were selected, the Party was governed and to the way that policy-making structures would operate in the future. Whilst achieved through negotiation with the unions, they were largely instigated by the Party's increasingly dominant, self-styled 'modernisers'.<sup>18</sup> In 1987, a local Electoral College system was introduced for candidate selection, which included the vote of individual party members and trade union representatives. In 1988, central control was given to the NEC over candidate selection in the event of by-elections.

Further changes, whose passage had largely been secured before the 1992 election, were affirmed after John Smith had become Leader at the Party's Annual Conference in the autumn of 1992. The National Policy Forum (NPF) and reduction in the trade union weighting at Conference from 90% to 70% were both approved. Overall, these organisational changes were secured within a wider set of changes to party communication and strategy that had been gradually developing since 1983, along with shifts to the Party's platform as commitments that were seen as being at the heart of Labour's 1983 election defeat, such as unilateralism and sweeping nationalisation, were abandoned.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979: Crisis and Transformation*. (London, Routledge, 1994). pp. 1-28.

<sup>18</sup> The labels 'moderniser' and 'traditionalist' are placed within quotation marks in this thesis in order to acknowledge the temporally-rooted political claims that these labels represent. Both of these terms are embedded in political argument about what it constitutes to be 'modern' or 'traditional', and the narratives underpinning these claims are explored within the context of this thesis. These labels are retained solely in order to correspond more readily with the existing literature on organisational reform in the Labour Party and party change as a whole.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Shaw, 'The Labour Party Since 1979'.

Subsequently, during the unexpectedly short leadership of John Smith, a further push was made to reform the Party's organisation. The most impactful of these changes was to the way that the Party related to its affiliated trade unions. Pushed by the Party's 'moderates' and those on its right, this culminated in the eradication of the block vote and equalising weightings in the leadership Electoral College to one third each for members, MPs and trade unions and affiliates.<sup>20</sup> The arguments surrounding these changes, and in particular the block vote, were tense and often public. The final Conference vote was tight, secured through a combination of the clever use of party process, and an important speech given by union stalwart John Prescott. In addition to these reforms, other important changes, which are not the primary focus of this thesis, also took place during this period, including the introduction of the All-Women Shortlist for candidate selection. This happened on the back of previous changes in this area in previous years, with the introduction of quotas for women in internal party positions in 1988.<sup>21</sup> OMOV was also extended to the election of the constituency section of the NEC.<sup>22</sup>

One final major package of organisational reform was secured by the Party's 'modernisers', as they made their way back into government in 1997. Subsequent to Tony Blair's victory in the leadership contest of 1994, attentions turned to the problems party organisation might present to the effective running of a Labour government. Keen to avoid self-sabotage, the Partnership in Power package was drawn up, with more negotiations between the leadership and the trade unions. It was agreed overwhelmingly at the 1997 Conference, in the face of a Leader commanding considerable support both inside Labour and within the country. This package substantially altered the way that party policy was to be made, cementing the role of the NPF and the Joint Policy Committee (JPC) as the hub of a rolling programme of policy-making. In this process, Conference would be limited to only voting for or against whole sets of policy, with alternative positions from which to choose only being presented if agreement on an issue could not be reached within the NPF and JPC. Furthermore, Conference was to be limited to discussion of contemporary issues that could not overlap with topics already being covered on the platform by ministers and the front bench team. The NEC was also

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<sup>20</sup> See Meg Russell, *Building New Labour: The Politics of Party Organisation*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Mark Wickham-Jones, 'John Smith's Settlement? The Work of the 1992-93 Labour Party – Trade Union Links Review Group', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 47:1, 2016, pp. 21-45.

<sup>21</sup> Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', pp. 96-128.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174-5.

restructured, quotas established, the Women's section eradicated and positions created for the Labour front bench, councillors, PLP and European Parliamentary Labour Party (EPLP).<sup>23</sup>

Meg Russell has highlighted how, together with those reforms under Kinnock and John Smith's leaderships, these organisational changes contributed to the making of New Labour.<sup>24</sup> By this point, the Party had also been transformed in platform and style, as it sought to find a 'third way', combining the goals of social justice with the proceeds of a liberal free-market approach to economics.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Labour had completed its reincarnation as 'New' Labour and built a public image that centred upon a break from its political past.<sup>26</sup>

After a far quieter period in terms of party change, largely owing to the fact that Labour were in office, the General Election defeat for the Party in 2010 signalled the beginning of another period of introspection that gave rise to a new drive for reform. This is the final period of reform considered within this thesis. Under the leadership of Ed Miliband, an early attempt was made to reconstruct Labour as a social movement with the Refounding Labour package, under the oversight of Peter Hain. Much of this package was watered down, because of opposition from the unions and whilst a tiered membership structure was introduced, registered supporter numbers never got near the 50,000 needed for them to be allowed a vote in leadership contests.

Whilst it was expected this would be Ed Miliband's sole contest with the unions over organisational change, a saga surrounding Unite the Union's involvement in a candidate selection in Falkirk triggered a second series of organisational reforms. These were more significant, resulting in the introduction of an individual opt-in for union members in order for any of their fees to go to Labour, an affiliated supporter membership category and the scrapping of the Electoral College for leadership elections. In its place, a One

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<sup>23</sup> For a particularly detailed account see Lewis Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: A Study in the Politics of Labour's Party Management*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014). pp. 94-102.

<sup>24</sup> Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour'.

<sup>25</sup> See Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*. (Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2008); Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour*, Revised Edition. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: Continuity and Change in the Making of New Labour*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Alan Finlayson, *Making Sense of New Labour*, (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2003).

Person One Vote semi-open primary was instituted. It was from this leadership election system that Jeremy Corbyn would later emerge victorious.

Both of these packages sat within a difficult period for Labour in terms of the regeneration of its political platform, as Ed Miliband's search for a distinctive political project centred on the idea of One Nation Labour fell by the wayside.<sup>27</sup> Miliband spent five years leading Labour and trying to respond to Conservative claims that Labour was too left-wing, dominated by the unions and incapable of running the economy.<sup>28</sup> The victory he worked for never came.

Throughout, this thesis focuses on particular segments of organisational reform in what is a broader landscape of structural and programmatic change during this period. Because of the elite narrative focus of this thesis, those organisational issues that were subject to the greatest debate, argument or presentation take primary focus. Particular emphasis has also been placed on similar types of change that pertain to issues of democratic process and participation as a whole. As such, mechanisms of party governance, policy-making, election and selection are focused on here.

In parallel with the reforms I am examining, this was also a period of significant changes in terms of women's representation within the Party. Labour adopted gender quotas in 1988 for internal party positions and introduced All-Women Shortlists in 1993. There has been a great deal of scholarship on this topic already.<sup>29</sup> However, it is worth noting that while they were just as contentious as the other organisational reforms, the narratives surrounding them reveal different points of emphasis, and different dividing lines, in comparison with the reforms associated with the trade union link (as suggested in Chapter 4, below). There is an interesting study to be done exploring these differences, however it falls beyond the scope of the present thesis.

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<sup>27</sup> Dimitri Batrouni, 'One Nation, Disconnected Party: The Evocation of One Nation Aimed to Unite the Nation, Instead it Highlighted the Labour Party's Divisions', *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

<sup>28</sup> See Tim Bale, *Five Year Mission: The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015); Eunice Goes, *The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband: Trying but Failing to Renew Social Democracy*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>29</sup> See Sarah Childs, 'The New Labour Women in the 1997 British Parliament: Issues of Recruitment and Representation', *Women's History Review*, 9:1, 2000, pp. 55-73; Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', pp. 96-128; Claire Annesley, Francesca Gains and Kirstein Rummary, *Women and New Labour: Engendering Politics and Policy?*. (Bristol, Policy Press, 2007).



## Structure and Methods

This thesis begins by establishing its theoretical and intellectual context, before proceeding with an analysis of the elite narratives surrounding these organisational reforms. Chapter 1 sets out the theoretical framework of this thesis and the interpretivist approach that is taken here to analysing elite narratives of organisational reform. It begins by outlining the existing theoretical literature on organisational change in politics parties within political science. It suggests that, whilst there clearly exists much work on the organisational aspect of party politics, little has been done to incorporate within this research the importance of the *language* of organisational reform and the way it has been used to define party identity. Consequently, the following sections of this theoretical chapter set out a clear definition of narratives and explain why stories matter in the context of the politics of party organisation. It is argued that, through the narratives used to justify, argue and explain organisational change, elites build visions of their party's identity and tie this to party structures. As such, the prime focus of this thesis is not the structural organisational changes themselves, but the language through which they are tied to visions of Labour as a community.

Chapter 2 constitutes a literature review of the major works on both Labour's organisational politics and its cultural and temporal politics. It is noted that much work has been undertaken throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on Labour's organisational politics. However, almost all of this work has focused on the impacts of Labour Party structures on the distribution of power, the decision-making processes and contests behind organisational reform, and the consequences that these have had for Labour's internal politics. Despite this, important work has been written on other aspects of Labour's temporal and cultural politics. From explorations of the myths and memories that underpin its internal life, to the temporal transformations that structured the Party's claim to being 'New' in the 1990s, it is clear that the temporal and cultural politics of Labour's platform have become an important focus of the way that we understand the Party. The gap that exists between these two strands means that those who are interested in Labour's cultural identity have paid only limited attention to the organisational elements that are fundamental to the way that it constitutes itself. Furthermore, those who are interested in Labour's organisation have not been able to consider in detail the different meanings and understandings within the Party's internal politics that have made issues of party organisation so very contentious.

The subsequent chapters provide the empirical content of this thesis. In order to conduct this analysis, a substantial amount of archival and documentary research has been conducted. The primary sources that have been consulted include Conference speeches, party reports, pamphlets, newspaper articles and reports, radio interviews and televised interviews and statements. In addition to this material, a small number of elite interviews were conducted as part of this project. These interviews were with senior party figures and officials who had close involvement with the organisational changes considered here. The data from these interviews is used sparingly and in a supplementary fashion, in order to add colour to the analysis itself rather than as essential empirical sources.

Chapter 3 explores organisational narratives during the years 1979-81, when the influence of the Party's left was reaching its climax in the wake of Labour's return to opposition. It charts how the Party's left drew on narratives of betrayal in order to legitimise their vision for a Labour Party community governed by notions of bottom-up accountability, through collectivist structures of mandatory reselection, Leader election and by giving the NEC control of the manifesto. Whilst the latter objective was never realised, the left managed to achieve substantial change. This represented the height of influence of stories of collectivism in the period covered within this thesis. In their opposition, centrists in the Party emphasised the importance of parliamentary independence to Labour's identity, both historically and to its future. For figures on the right and in the Gang of Four, the stories justifying the collectivist bottom-up accountability that the left put forward marked the fracturing of Labour's identity as a parliamentary force and signalled its bankruptcy as a site of representative politics. This story was crucial to the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Chapter 4 analyses competing narratives of party organisation during Neil Kinnock's tenure as Leader, with particular reference to the period after the 1987 General Election. After two difficult election defeats, and the downfall of the Labour left, Kinnock and his supporters sought to remake Labour's organisational identity. They argued that the 1987 election was, in part, a symptom of the temporal de-synchronisation the Labour Party now faced in organisational terms as a result of its failure to respond to wider historically grounded socio-political change. The 'modernisation' they argued for was intended to take Labour's processes of candidate selection, party governance and policy-making and 'catch them up' with contemporary politics. This was to be achieved through recognition of the value of restrictively defined individualised participation, in combination with

central control, to Labour's praxis. Thus, in the dominant narratives of Labour's organisational identity, notions of what it meant to be a 'modern' Labour Party were tied to the legitimacy of individualised democracy and political involvement. This narrative was put forward within the wider context of Thatcherite individualism and an increasing emphasis within the Party's policy platform on the value of socialism to the individual citizen. Despite resistance from the left, and some figures in the trade unions, visions of Labour as a collectivist organisation rooted in bottom-up 'accountability' declined in their influence in important respects.

Chapter 5 continues with this theme of the individualisation of Labour's political identity. It does so by focusing particularly on the way that party elites narrated changes to the Party's relationship with its founding trade unions between 1992 and 1993 in the course of John Smith's leadership. During this period, the 'modernisers' secured changes to the trade union block vote, as well as ratifying shifts in the weight of union votes at Conference and cementing the introduction of the NPF. As the influence of the left, and the importance of collectivist narratives of its politics continued to decline, the association between 'modernisation', histories of Labour as an adaptive party that was yet to catch up organisationally with current expectations of politics, and the value of individuals to Labour's organisational community were further developed in the language of those at the top of the Party. This constituted a substantial reimagining of the collectivism that had defined the value of the union link to Labour's character.

Following this, Chapter 6 examines Labour's organisational 'cultural turn' under the leadership of Tony Blair between 1994 and 1997. Whilst the narrative of increasing individualisation was put on hold, the Party's elites turned to how Labour's own political culture, its relationship with its history and the expectations embedded in understandings about its internal structures might present obstacles to the conduct of government itself. In the midst of this, narratives of 'modernisation' that had been used to chart the relationship between Labour's journey through history and need to adopt individualised structures of participation were tied to a subtle but important emphasis on the Labour Party as a parliamentary political force. This emphasis sat in tension with stories of 'partnership' and shared 'responsibility' headlined in the Partnership in Power package. Consequently, at the beginning of a 'new dawn', despite decades of reform, Labour's identity in terms of its commitment and deference to Parliament remained unclear and muddled.

Chapter 7 focuses on the more recent organisational changes that were developed, negotiated and implemented under Ed Miliband. This chapter argues that the legacy of New Labour left awkward temporal politics for Miliband and his supporters to deal with when it came to both issues of party organisation and platform. The search to find a defined political project that was distinct from the New Labour brand, but that did not depend on bankrupting the Party's political value by rubbing in its entirety its most recent (and longest) period in office, led Miliband to reach into the past in order to renew Labour's political practices. He made an early push to rebuild Labour as a 'movement', emphasising restoration of the Party's roots whilst drawing on the 'modernising' logics that had been central to the claims of successive Labour leaders since 1983. Whilst the Refounding Labour package ultimately amounted to far less than had been hoped, the Falkirk selection incident led Miliband and his team to substantially extend this notion of Labour's political identity and fundamentally alter its relations with the unions by focussing on individual trade unionists, rather than unions as collective bodies, and ridding the Party of its collective Electoral College for leadership elections.

The concluding chapter underlines how this return to an organisational narrative of Labour as a movement by Miliband had important consequences for Labour's present situation. Despite its individualising focus, the new process of leadership election paved the way for the rise of Corbynism. Somewhat ironically, the very mechanisms that were intended to usher in a new era of 'moderate' activism contributed to the election of the most left-wing Labour Leader in decades. Furthermore, Miliband's movement emphasis legitimised Corbyn's own claims to wish to return Labour to its movement roots, a crucial element of his campaign and the organisational narratives of the left since. Though the full impact of Corbynism on Labour's organisation can only be thoroughly judged from a future vantage point, these narratives put forward by Corbyn and his supporters have already had important implications for internal party unity and agreement amongst party elites over Labour's identity as a parliamentary force. Despite this, as yet, little has been done by the Labour left to challenge the individualising narratives that have increasingly come to dominate conceptions of Labour's organisation. Moreover, it is suggested that recent internal tensions expose the continuation of a fractured identity when it comes to ideas about Labour's history and what its proper organisational form should be now, and in the future, particularly when it comes to the centrality of Parliament to its political mission.

## **2. Narratives and the Cultural Politics of Organisational Change**

To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture, programmatically refused.<sup>1</sup>

— Hayden White

Organisational structures are about more than process and bureaucracy. They are the means through which parties go about understanding and defining themselves as political communities. In this light, attempts to change the way leaders are elected, methods of candidate selection, processes of policy-making and party governance are a matter of redefining collective identity. The degree of organisational change itself may vary. The changes may be substantial or incremental, consensual or hotly contested, quickly become part of an enduring settlement or the subject of prolonged battles. Regardless, they always involve the telling and retelling of stories. It is in these stories – or narratives – that parties build understandings of themselves in relation to the way they are organised.

In exploring the relationship between the narrative form and the representation of events and their causes in historiography, Hayden White emphasised the ubiquity of narratives as a mode of human communication. The arena of politics is no exception to this ubiquity. Narratives are an essential part of politics. They give politics and its practice a sense of structure and destination. They recount events, describe circumstances, order the otherwise disorderly political reality and justify particular courses of action. Furthermore, in public settings where they form the basis of an attempt to persuade or unite, narratives are the means by which actors engage in the politics of culture and identity by seeking to lay down the features and essences of particular groups, organisations or communities. Temporal claims are central to these arguments. Interpretations of the past (whether near or far) and the assertion of particular values regularly form part of the telling of the chain

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<sup>1</sup> Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1, 1980, p. 5.

of events, or the story, that the narrative describes. It is in these narratives that collective identities, whether in the community of a nation, class or political party, are produced and contested.

This chapter lays down a framework for analysing the narratives through which the relationship between party organisation and party identity, at key moments of change, is understood and recounted by party elites. Elites are defined here as those who have power or influence within a party. In particular, this chapter sets out a constructivist approach to understanding politics and the narrative meanings that party elites use to articulate, describe and justify their proposals for party reform in major episodes of organisational change in political parties. It is argued that these meanings are not singular and homogenous and are liable to change across history. They are part of debates about what a party should be as an organisation and how it should practice its politics in response to the circumstances it faces. Through these narratives, visions of Labour's identity as a political organisation are presented: understandings of its place in time and its past put forward, and competing definitions of democracy contested.

This chapter first outlines approaches to party organisation that exist in the literature within political science. It is argued that, whilst a great deal of scholarship has been interested in establishing typologies of party organisation, broad trends in organisational change and the material pressures that lead to such change, limited focus has been placed on the key importance of moments of organisational reform in the production and evolution of party identity. Subsequently, this chapter sets out a narrative approach to understanding the cultural politics of organisational change. A clear minimal definition of narratives is laid out that focuses on their nature as stories connecting events. It is argued that narratives are an important form through which versions of reality and identity are constructed. Essential to this construction are meanings established through references to temporality and values. Finally, this chapter then goes on to relate such a conception of narratives as an important site of meaning and identity to the study of political parties as organisations at moments of organisational change.

In all of this, the aim of this chapter is to establish a framework through which the nature of Labour's history and identity can be examined in a theoretically informed way, combining insights from political and social science and applying these within a historical analysis. Consequently, this chapter also provides a springboard for considering the existing literature on Labour's organisational and cultural politics, which is the focus of

chapter three. If we are to understand better the organisational politics and history of the Labour Party, we must engage with the language and debates that constitute its performance and argument in public forums. This means paying attention to the different visions of organisational form presented by its key actors, and to the ways in which these visions have shifted, changed and mutated during major moments of party reform. This will show the extent to which organisational debates have shaped Labour's cultural politics.

### **Political Science and Party Organisation**

Within political science, much of the work on party organisation and organisational change has been conducted as part of a comparative empirical and theoretical literature that has focused on exploring the relationship between material conditions, party organisation and party change in a 'scientific' manner. Through this, scholars have sought to explain what characterises political parties as organisations, how parties move from one particular structural form to another, why this change takes place and what impact this has on the internal distribution of power. Whether in terms of mechanisms for internal selections and elections, policy-making or party governance, the organisational arrangements of parties are a foundational part of their capacity to perform their political functions of representation, programme formulation and campaigning. Changes to these elements can affect each of these functions. The body of work that follows in this vein has been extensive, and much of it has stressed the role of elites and the influence of history in determining organisational form.

An early example of this kind of work is that by Robert Michels. In particular, Michels' 1915 account of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy' significantly influenced the study of party organisation, with his assertion that in the natural course and progression of their development, all political parties were likely to see leaderships accruing structural power at the expense of party members. As such, for Michels, parties had a tendency to become more centralised as their leaderships accrued power through the course of their development.<sup>2</sup> Embedded within even these early accounts of political parties was a clear

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. (New York, Dover Publications, 1959).

concern for the distribution of power in intra-party structures and the consequences this can have for 'democracy'. This concern has continued in the literature since.

Others have proposed typologies of political parties and their particular form, largely as part of a theorised relationship between the material conditions affecting parties across their histories and their organisational nature. In 1954 Maurice Duverger described the 'mass party', with its large membership and affinity with a particular section of society, such as those like Labour that rose on the left in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Otto Kirchheimer then described a shift towards 'catch-all parties' which sought to broaden their base and to generate appeal beyond their members.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Richard Katz and Peter Mair went on to argue that 'cartel parties' had emerged which had reduced greatly the influence and importance of their memberships and co-operated with one another in order to cement their positions within party systems.<sup>5</sup> In each of these contributions, organisational change was explored in an attempt to draw out general conclusions about the trajectories of parties as organisations and the ways in which they have moved through particular formations and models of intra-party democracy.

Explaining how parties relate to their members in a period of declining participation has also become a substantial point of interest for researchers in recent years. Anika Gauja has argued that party 'membership' as a category is itself constructed out of contravening pressures from legislation, state norms, the expectations of party members and activists. In this context, parties seek to find ways of building notions of membership that give them legitimacy and allow them to deploy party members in the activities that make them useful to parties, such as providing boots on the ground at elections.<sup>6</sup> Susan Scarrow has noted how the organisational basis of the way that parties seek to involve members and supporters has shifted, with the rise of 'multi-speed' models of organising. Such models see parties offering their members more opportunities for participation and engagement,

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties*. (London, Methuen, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Otto Kirchheimer, 'The Transformation of the West European Party System', in Joseph LaPolambra and Myron Weiner (eds.) *Political Parties and Political Development*. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1966). pp. 177-200.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Katz and Peter Mair, 'Changing Models of Party Organisation and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party', *Party Politics*, 1:1, pp. 5-28.

<sup>6</sup> Anika Gauja, 'The Construction of Party Membership', *European Journal of Political Research*, 54:2, 2015, pp. 232-48.



whilst simultaneously looking beyond party members for engagement through mechanisms like semi-open primaries.<sup>7</sup>

Explaining exactly how such change takes place has been a further common thread within the organisational change literature and the literature on party change more widely, where the role of party elites has been a key point of interest. In his work on party organisation, Angelo Panebianco argued that political parties were subject to both internal and external environmental factors and that it was these that were crucial in bringing about organisational change. Panebianco also acknowledged the importance of party identity but in an institutional fashion, arguing that the founding of political parties and the decisions of party elites in this formative period sets the historic course of a party's character.<sup>8</sup>

Considering party reform and party goals as a whole, Harmel and Janda have proposed a tri-partite framework for understanding the pressures that lead to change in both policy and organisation. They argue that a shift in factional dominance, leadership and external events like an electoral defeat are crucial in driving change. As such, change in political parties cannot just be understood as incremental or part of a longer-term historical process. Party change involves actors – party elites in particular – and events, in order to happen.<sup>9</sup> Beyond this, Gauja has charted the internal, competitive and external pressures that shape party reform and acknowledged the interrelated importance of normative goals and values in the process of organisational reform.<sup>10</sup>

Such studies highlight that focussing on elites is useful, though not exhaustive. Parties often have different levels, layers, and sets of ideas existing within them. But elites do shape the process of organisational reform in particularly important ways and the conduct of organisational change is most regularly an elite exercise, sometimes inciting the interest of party members but rarely garnering excitement and engagement beyond a party and amongst the electorate.

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilisation*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties: Organization and Power*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Harmel and Kenneth Janda, 'An Integrated Theory of Party Goals and Party Change', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 6:3, 1994, pp. 259-87.

<sup>10</sup> Anika Gauja, *Party Reform: The Causes, Consequences and Challenges of Organizational Change*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016).

These approaches have proved fruitful in probing organisational arrangements within political parties and exploring the impact organisational change can have on their form and the distribution of power. However, they understate the contingent nature of party structure and the extent to which party organisation is continually negotiated and renegotiated. Furthermore, whilst it is right to stress the role of party elites in processes of change, this literature has downplayed the way in which organisational change occurs within and in reference to a particular cultural context. Elite actions take place within a collective culture, and the way in which they are justified, explained and narrated to members is a crucial part of the Party's self-fashioning and the articulation of its self-image. This thesis therefore focuses on a series of moments at which the Labour Party's organisational structures and – crucially – its identity became the subject of (often heated) debate.

### **The Language of Politics: Narratives, Events and Collective Identities**

In these debates, narratives have a crucial function. Various academic approaches have attempted to elucidate the theoretical relationship between language and the political world. Of these, narratives have become a significant methodological frame through which those interested in politics (and its history) have sought to analyse how the stories we tell shape the course and content of the political in an assortment of settings. Before laying out the connection between narratives and the study of party organisation, it is useful to draw out the theoretical relationship between the narrative form and the interpretation of politics in a more expansive sense. In particular, it is important to set out a clear definition of narratives and to explicate the ways in which they can form a site of contestation when it comes to issues of political identity. Through such a lens, it is then possible to understand the importance of public narratives, in speech and text, to the articulation of the politics of organisational reform.

An array of different definitions of the precise structure and form of narratives exist and literary critics, linguists, social scientists and historians have dedicated a substantial

amount of work to defining and theorising the form and functions of narratives.<sup>11</sup> The approach undertaken here is best understood as ‘pragmatist’, in which it is argued that concepts of inquiry should not be presented as rigid and ahistorical but as constructions appropriate to the purpose of inquiry when it is undertaken.<sup>12</sup> Such an approach seeks to abstain from adhering to more structuralist definitions of narrative that have proposed theorisations of the narrative form that are supposedly universal in their applicability in all languages and cultures, and across all historical contexts.<sup>13</sup> This thesis is concerned with the thematic content of narratives, rather than their linguistic structure and form – whether in general or in relation to the particular question of organisational reforms in the Labour Party considered here. Given this, it makes sense to base the subsequent analysis on a minimal definition of narratives that contains as few *a priori* assumptions as is possible.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, narratives are defined here as stories that represent the connections between events. In such a conceptualisation, narratives are in their essence a form of language that engages in the ordering, decluttering and construction of ‘reality’ and are, at their very core, essential to the production of time that underpins human experience and society. This production of time is achieved through the articulation of beginnings, middles and (often, though not always) ends.<sup>15</sup> It is this emphasis upon stories, and their temporality, that demarcates narrative analysis from other approaches to ways of studying language, such as those focused on discourse influenced by thinkers like Foucault. Through this linking of time and events, narratives are the point at which representations of events, justifications, concepts and culture can coalesce.

Mark Bevir has charted how the study of politics has itself moved through different overarching narratives in the course of its history. Initially, the discipline was dominated by ‘factual’ historical accounts that were rooted in grand developmental narratives of

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<sup>11</sup> See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. 3 Volumes. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, 1985 and 1988); Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989);

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research*. (London, Sage, 2004). pp. 2-16.

<sup>13</sup> An example of a structuralist approach to narratives can be seen in Todorov’s assertion that all narratives follow a three part structure in which an initial equilibrium is disrupted and then resolved. For a brief summary, see Tsvetan Todorov and Arnold Weinstein, ‘Structural Analysis of Narrative’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 3:1, 1969, pp. 70-6.

<sup>14</sup> See Shaul Shenhav, *Analyzing Social Narratives*. (Abingdon, Routledge, 2015). pp. 11-16.

<sup>15</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Volume 3*. (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988).

political change. Here, the study of history and the study of politics were fused. Subsequently, in the aftermath of the First World War, analyses slowly began to move towards positivist ‘scientific’ logics that sought to analyse political behaviour, action and change via an ‘objective’ empirical approach to understanding the political world as analytical units largely devoid of particular historicity. In response to these positivist accounts, from the 1960s onwards, scholars drawing on poststructuralist theory gradually began to challenge the notion that our understanding of politics can be divorced from language. By consequence, whilst positivistic accounts have continued to dominate, a large number of studies emerged that analysed the importance of text and speech, and meaning-making, to interpreting the political world. More recently, radical historicist approaches have sprung up that have asserted that, whilst poststructuralist accounts have been right to place language centrally, historical particularism and the importance of contingency and agency underpinning political actions, events and change must be more firmly acknowledged.<sup>16</sup> It is within this radical historicist challenge to foundationalist accounts of politics and political history that this thesis is rooted, with its focus on the construction of meaning and identity in debates surrounding organisational change in the Labour Party between 1979 and 2014.

Definitions of narratives and their corresponding theorisations have not been solely focused on the telling of events and the construction of individual identities. In 1998, Patterson and Monroe, in advocating for a focus on narratives in political science, described in broad terms how ‘narratives are important in providing both individuals and collectives with a sense of purpose and place’.<sup>17</sup> This corresponds to a widespread and diffuse relevance of narratives to social and political life. It is possible to interrogate such narratives at different levels: that of the individual or the group. Furthermore, it is also possible to conduct such analyses in relation to the explanation of behaviour or the evaluation of the construction of meanings.

In setting out an approach to understanding governance and the state, Bevir and Rhodes have emphasised the importance of narratives in their attempts to introduce a clearly conceptualised interpretivist challenge to understanding context, belief and action in the analysis of policy-making and political change. They argue that it is the interaction

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<sup>16</sup> See Mark Bevir, ‘Political Studies as Narrative and Science 1880-2000’, *Political Studies*, 54:3, 2006, pp. 583-606; Mark Bevir, *New Labour: A Critique*. (Abingdon, Routledge, 2005). pp. 1-28.

<sup>17</sup> Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, ‘Narrative in Political Science’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1:3, 1998, p. 321.

between ‘tradition’ and ‘dilemmas’, and the ways in which individuals construct narratives of the world around them, that are essential to understanding the interplay between structure and agency in the practices of governance.<sup>18</sup> Such an approach echoes a stress within some theorisations of narratives on understanding cognition and action. Scholars like Bruner have emphasised the importance of narratives to the construction of meaning and understanding in a psychological, cognitive and individualistic sense.<sup>19</sup> However, whilst such approaches might prove useful for understanding processes of decision-making and the practices underpinning governance, they have less use when focussing particularly on the ways in which narratives form part of *collective* identities.

Beyond these person-centred ‘embodied’ accounts that focus on the relationship between narratives and action, others have instead sought to emphasise the meaning-making functions of narratives and the ways in which they can relate to groups and underpin social and collective identities. This meaning-making can take place in a variety of different forms and through reference to a variety of different objects and ideas in the course of a particular story or version of events.<sup>20</sup> As such, narratives of politics surrounding ideas of nation, state, party or movement regularly contain a web of normative judgements and arguments about the nature of things as they were, as they are and as they should be. Through these characterisations and arguments, collective identities demarcate and define the ‘us’ around which a people – however defined – can come together. This ‘us’ stands in relief against the ‘other’. In so doing, collective identities give certain particular and special characteristics. Anderson’s conception of the ‘imagined community’ provides one example of the way in which the constructed collective identity of a particular community can draw boundaries around itself, in this case the nation state.<sup>21</sup>

Essential to the social and collective importance of narratives is the existence of a wider audience for whom these stories are produced. In their theoretical exposition of the relationship between narratives and social theory, Somers and Gibson differentiate between varieties of narratives: ontological, public, conceptual and metanarrative. Of these, public narratives, those that are produced in some kind of public forum and with

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<sup>18</sup> See Mark Bevir and R.A.W Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance*. (Abingdon, Routledge, 2003); Mark Bevir and R.A.W Rhodes, *The State as Cultural Practice*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Bruner, ‘Actual Minds’.

<sup>20</sup> Shaul Shenhav, ‘Analyzing Social Narratives’, pp. 17-8.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London, Verso, 1983).

an audience, are particularly important to the construction of social identities. Such narratives engage explicitly with ‘cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual.’<sup>22</sup> Here, the ‘public’ need not be restrictively defined. Whether in a meeting, to a Conference, or to a mass audience via the media, narratives are an important part of the way that actors produce and contest identities.

In the production of these stories, the temporality of narratives and the temporality of collective identities are interconnected. This interconnectedness has been acknowledged within historical approaches influenced by the linguistic turn. In this particular disciplinary context, narratives have been viewed as an important form through which relationships between identity and senses of continuity with history are built at the level of both individuals and groups. For instance, oral history has sought to probe the relationship between human experiences, mythological notions of the past and popular histories.<sup>23</sup> Beyond oral history, Hobsbawm and Ranger highlighted the contingent nature of tradition and the way in which narratives about the past can form an important part of the social construction of identities in the present.<sup>24</sup> And, Emily Robinson has explained how notions of history and the ‘historic’ permeate contemporary British politics and underpin the identity of political parties, especially in moments where they are seeking to reinvent themselves or shift their position.<sup>25</sup> Language constructs identities through forging particular relationships with time. This provides collectives – communities, groups or organisations – with a sense of where they come from, and what practices delineate them.

In his sociological account of European identity, Klaus Eder has argued in a more theoretically explicit way that conceptions of existence in past and present, and even the projection of an identity into the future (through reference to a positive transformation or the threat of future decline) constitute a central aspect of the narrative construction of

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret R. Somers and Gloria D. Gibson ‘Reclaiming the Epistemological “Other”: Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity’ in Craig Calhoun (ed.) *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994). p. 62.

<sup>23</sup> See Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*. (London, Routledge, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012).

identities. However, Eder also argues that collective identities are about the presentation of continuous and fixed social relationships through time.<sup>26</sup>

This is symptomatic of what has been an overemphasis within the theorisation of collective identities on continuity. Such a conception downplays the contingency of these identities and the way in which collective identities are part of a complex and shifting process of formation. Whilst identities are demarcated in relation to time, they are not static, fixed or monolithic but contingent, fluid and open to change.<sup>27</sup> It is with this change, fluidity and multiplicity in particular that this thesis is concerned in its focus on the development of elite narratives of organisational change in Labour.

Beyond particular evocations of events, whether historical, ongoing or anticipated, collective identities and the narratives that define them can hold within them features that move into the realms of the ideological or conceptual. The values evoked in narratives and their corresponding concepts are subject to this within-timeness. They are bound up in the stories and the past, present and future as it is imagined and put forward. In this way, normative ideals like democracy, justice, liberty, freedom and patriotism can become part of the claims a particular collective makes about its characteristics in its composition and practice.<sup>28</sup> These values, like the identities of which they are a part, are not enduring in their meaning and content but part of the wider conversation between historical circumstances, events and identity forged in narrative.<sup>29</sup> In this conversation, acts of definition and redefinition are important. As Robert Saunders put it in his analysis of the language of democracy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ‘political rhetoric is purposeful, rather than analytical; it is a weapon against opponents and a source of authority, and it structures understandings of the world that create or shut down political space. The

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<sup>26</sup> Klaus Eder, ‘A Theory of Collective Identity: Making Sense of the Debate on a “European Identity”’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12:4, 2009, pp. 427-47.

<sup>27</sup> The complexity of collective identities and their narration, and the under-exploration of the relationship between temporality and identity change have been noted in the context of management and organisational studies. See Andrew D. Brown, ‘A Narrative Approach to Collective Identities’, *Journal of Management Studies*, 43:4, 2006, pp. 731-53.

<sup>28</sup> In his exploration of the place of rituals and symbols in politics and the language that defines these, David Kertzer has noted that both symbols and language have the capacity to engage in the determination of what is right and wrong. See David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988). pp. 40-1.

<sup>29</sup> Various scholars of the history of political thought and the analysis of ideology have articulated in similar terms the way in which concepts and language are co-dependent and bound within the historical contexts in which they are deployed. See J.G.A Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*. (London, Methuen & Co, 1971); Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics Volume I: Regarding Method*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001); Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. (Oxford, Clarendon, 1998).

definition of terms is inherently a political act and always serves political ends.’<sup>30</sup> In this way, the relationship between concepts, values and identity is a reciprocal one. Narratives of collective identity are crucial in asserting what concepts and values underpin the spirit of a group and what it is that these precisely mean.

Thus, narratives are an essential part of politics by virtue of their parallel capacity to order time through linking events and to construct the collective identities upon which much of modern politics depends. Through them, states, organisations and institutions – including political parties – build a sense of who they are in reference to time and to the values, ideas and concepts their processes and practices apparently imbue. These senses of identity are subject to change and dispute. Patterson and Monroe write how ‘the shared stories of a culture provide grounds for common understandings and interpretations. But as such, they may become sites of cultural conflict when those common understandings are challenged.’<sup>31</sup>

Narratives are as important to understanding change and conflict as they are to understanding unity and continuity. By analysing such narratives within a historical approach, it is possible to trace the way in which the content and form of narratives on a given issue have remained the same, or shifted and changed over time.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, it becomes possible to examine the ways in which particular stories have constructed and reconstructed notions of the essential temporal and conceptual features of a particular group or community and the ways in which these defining characteristics have evolved and been contested.

### *The Origins of Narratives and Narrative Change*

Where do these narratives come from? Why and how do they change? These are problems and questions to which those focused on explaining continuity and change, and engaging with notions of structure and agency, point by way of critique.<sup>33</sup> These are difficult questions, to which there is no easy answer. Nor is the literature itself settled on how best to reply. Neither, is this thesis concerned with answering this question in theoretical

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Saunders, ‘Democracy’, in David Craig and James Thompson (eds.) *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Molly Patterson and Kristen Renwick Monroe, ‘Narrative in Political Science’, p. 321.

<sup>32</sup> Shaul Shenhav, ‘Analyzing Social Narratives’, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Bevir, ‘New Labour: A Critique’, pp. 24-7.



terms. Within the context of this particular research, the focus is not on why narratives change in an abstract or theoretical sense but on why and how they have changed in the specific context of the organisational politics of Labour.

The analysis of narratives presented here is conducted on the basis that the groups and actors involved are active participants in debates and arguments over organisational change. As such, they are not merely ‘the bearers of the discourses or quasi-structures that speak and persist through them.’<sup>34</sup> Instead, actors actively produce and reproduce arguments, through narrative, about the identity of the Labour Party as a political organisation. Therefore, the production and reproduction of narratives is, in important respects, contingent upon human action.

However, the agency inherent in this contingency is not without limits, or constraint. The process of narration, and the building of a narrative, does not happen in isolation or without referents. Narrators draw upon a culturally established repertoire of language within a specific historical context, and the associated web of language and meanings this makes available. It is within this context that they articulate their stories.<sup>35</sup>

Following from this, the human actions underpinning the production and reproduction of narratives do not just respond to context, but play an important role in the creation and shaping of this environment. Narratives, and the ideas and references they contain, can become well-worn or familiar; embedded within the language of elites and their ways of building understandings and constructing the relationship between events and identities. By consequence, they can influence what is possible or not possible, desirable or undesirable, appropriate or inappropriate. Thus, the relationship between narrators, narratives and narrative change is a complex and reciprocal one in which narrators draw on a wider context in the formation of their stories and are also involved in shaping this broader landscape with the narratives they form and articulate. Through examining these narratives and their development, we can better understand the cultural politics of organisational change in political parties.

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Bevir, ‘Political Studies as Narrative and Science’, p. 599.

<sup>35</sup> Theorisations of structure and agency as mutually linked, co-dependent and indivisible have been emphasised in post-structuralist theory and recent developments in work on political rhetoric. See Alan Finlayson and Jeremy Valentine, ‘Introduction’ in Alan Finlayson and Jeremy Valentine (eds.) *Politics and Post-Structuralism: An Introduction*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002). pp. 1-20; James Martin, ‘Situating Speech: A Rhetorical Approach to Political Strategy’, *Political Studies*, 63:1, 2015, pp. 25-42.

## Stories of Organisational Change

Having set out a definition of narratives and drawn out their importance to understanding the ways that identity manifests in politics, it is now worthwhile considering how such an understanding can be used when charting Labour's organisational journey as a party since 1979 and analysing its episodes of organisational reform. The following section sets out how narratives play a role in the organisational politics of political parties and the way in which they form a key arena of identity construction and reconstruction at moments of organisational change. Specifically, it focuses on the importance of the narrative construction of political circumstances, time and organisational values when party elites undertake organisational reform. Political parties and their respective organisations are not just material structures with people and processes but have identities. In light of this, episodes of organisational change are not just about considering the particular institutional organisational mechanisms and processes. They are key moments in which the identity of political parties are contested. Narratives are essential to this process of contestation and change. In these narratives, different visions of a party's organisational identity, its mythological markers, its place in history, its core values and its destinations are presented.

Within the scholarship, there are some notable exceptions to the dominant mode of understanding party organisation in material terms within political science. In her anthropological analysis of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat party conferences in the United Kingdom, Florence Faucher-King sets out the way in which these annual gatherings reaffirm the constructed nature of parties as organisations. She notes how, just as Anderson's nations have imagined communities, so do political parties. In the cut and thrust of competitive political arenas, they seek to go about defining an identity for themselves and drawing clear lines between themselves and their competitors. This identity formation (and reformation) is a social process in which symbols, particular conceptions of tradition, collective memories, and reified practices all come together to form the cultural fabric of the Party.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in his analysis of the transformation of the Italian Communist Party, David Kertzer has effectively demonstrated the way in

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<sup>36</sup> Florence Faucher-King, *Changing Parties: An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

which symbolic, ritualistic and mythical language played an important part in facilitating internal resistance to Occhetto's attempts as Leader to reform the Party for the post-communist era in the 1990s.<sup>37</sup>

However, research that seeks to understand how political and organisational change within parties engages with their political culture and identity is still scarce. Positioned alongside such rare accounts, and against the realist political science of party organisation and organisational change outlined above, this thesis takes an interpretivist approach to exploring elite narratives during episodes of organisational change within the Labour Party between 1979 and 2014. It does so on the basis that such narratives are important sites of identity formation and contestation, that they are ubiquitous in the organisational politics of political parties, and that this is particularly the case at times of reform. Thus, by analysing these narratives of organisational change through a party's history, it is possible to trace how a party's identity has developed over time.

When elites construct these stories, they represent the political circumstances a party faces, justify the response of party reform and the rationale for particular forms of change, and explain the solutions they offer. Furthermore, elites portray how pressing ahead with organisational reform is consistent with their party's particular culture and central values (or particular versions of these). Each of these elements can be contested by counter-narratives put forward by opponents of change. These opponents may argue that proposed reforms: are not needed; will not resolve the circumstances the party faces; are not consistent with the party's tradition and history; or are not aligned with the values and ideals that the party does, or should, embody. Thus, organisational change in political parties, particularly those like the British Labour Party, with federal structures, interested memberships and rule-oriented political cultures, can be seen as moments in which important actors debate the Party's core identity. This is where elite visions of the political landscape and a party's organisational identity are most fully manifested and the development of party identity in organisational terms can be traced.

Party elites are important to organisational reform. They are often its key drivers, looking to determine the need for change and the form change should take. However, party change cannot be conducted by a single individual elite acting alone. Organisational reform is

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<sup>37</sup> David Kertzer, *Politics and Symbols: The Italian Communist Party and the Fall of Communism*. (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996).

commonly a social process requiring communication, whether amongst elites, between party elites and members, elites and supporters, or elites and the electorate. The nature of politics itself, and of political parties, requires that elites describe, explain, argue and justify.<sup>38</sup> James Martin describes how, through these descriptions and rhetorical claims, 'it is the creativity of rhetors that shapes reality by defining the situation through argument.'<sup>39</sup>

Political language must engage with social and political conditions if it is to mean anything at all. Narratives, in their capacity to engage in the representation of the links between events, can firstly then be understood as an important site in which the nature of the political circumstances facing a party are represented, constructed and communicated. The communication of these circumstances is a key part of elite arguments about organisational reform. Elections can be lost, memberships can decline and scandals can occur. But these events only take on meaning when they are mobilised as part of a political narrative about the party and where it is headed. Thus, whilst scholars have argued that various material conditions are critical in bringing about organisational change, here it is instead proposed that these conditions are relevant to the politics of organisational change and party identity only in that they often form a part of its narrative, and are frequently used as a point of departure by those arguing for change.

In engaging in the politics of organisational change, party elites must communicate, through text or speech, why reform is required and how their proposals resolve this. Narratives are a way of articulating arguments and interpretations of an electoral defeat and the wider political landscape, the strengths and weaknesses of a party's structure in terms of its efficiency or effectiveness, and characterising the disposition of party members when it comes to the party's current structures and form. In doing so, the stories party elites present are crucial to establishing the nature of the conditions requiring change and creating space in which to assert their preferred response.

The responses and proposals for reform themselves cannot however be represented in alien, culturally unrecognisable and removed terms but must engage with existing conceptions of a party's identity, its cultural fabric, history and values. In similar terms, Kertzer describes how symbols and their language are significant in political

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<sup>38</sup> Alan Finlayson, 'From Beliefs to Argument: Interpretive Methodology and Rhetorical Political Analysis', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:4, 2007, pp. 545-63.

<sup>39</sup> James Martin, 'Situating Speech', p. 30.

organisations of all kinds in their capacity to give a sense of continuity, even in moments of change. This construction of continuity is crucial in order to provide legitimacy in cultural terms. Without this, 'dramatic discontinuities threaten the integrity of any political organisation.'<sup>40</sup> The stories party elites use not only justify change as a solution to a problem, they also must present it as consistent with a version of the very essence of what the party is, what it exists to represent and achieve, and how it practices its politics.

Just as in other organisations and communities, political parties do not merely exist as objects in space, but are described, understood and argued over in relation to time. This is a further crucial component of elite narratives of organisational politics. Founding myths, representations of history, analysis of its present conditions and projections of a party's future all form a part of its identity. And, in episodes of organisational reform, changes to party structures are placed in relation to these elements through narratives. For example, the new means through which candidates are selected, policy is made or leaders are selected may be viewed as a return to an authentic but now absent past or as a natural progression of a party's history towards a 'modern' destination. In such claims, particular visions of the essence of a party's identity in time are presented. The importance of this temporality is compounded by the very existence of parties in time, with founding structures that may mutate and change across history, or persist in their original form for decades. These structures both play host to, and are the subject of, internal political debates, clashes and contestations. Through these debates, elites taking part in organisational reform can assert and reshape and particular conceptions of a party's cultural fabric, historical inheritance and destiny.

Furthermore, organisational changes are not just rooted in time but often require recourse to normative concepts and the articulation of values. Faucher-King acknowledges, just as nations may be premised on particular values, so too can political parties.<sup>41</sup> These values may be intrinsically ideological ('liberal', 'conservative' or 'social democratic') or more generic ('fairness' or 'democracy'), but they are essential to the stories a party tells about itself.

Foremost of these are concerns about intra-party democracy and legitimacy, especially when it comes to larger and more established parties in competitive democracies. With

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<sup>40</sup> David Kertzer, 'Ritual, Politics and Power', p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> See Florence Faucher-King, 'Changing Parties', pp.167-213.

structures of policy-making, the election of leaders and the selection of candidates, political parties have to negotiate a series of challenging questions about who has a say and how decisions should be arrived at. These questions are foundational, and the answers to them are key to how a party constitutes itself as a collective and presents itself to those beyond its boundaries. Whilst political scientists have spent a substantial amount of time modelling and justifying particular forms of intra-party democracy, it is also important to understand this in narrative terms, as the projection of visions of how such a democracy functions. It takes more than structures to make a party's identity a democratic one and what exactly this democracy constitutes of requires designation. The meaning of democracy: how power should be distributed, what engagement consists of, and how people can legitimately take part, are each elements that can be woven into the story of organisational reform – and can also be disputed.

Each of these different narrative themes compound the ways in which the narratives of organisational change can be the subject of disagreement and argument. The definition and accuracy of representations of cultural conceptions of time and of values add extra layers of complexity. When these episodes are hotly contested, they can become the focus of an intense 'culture clash', in which opposing sides comes to blows over different visions of what a party's organisational identity was, is, and should be. This can disrupt a party's entire sense of self.

Thus, the debates that surround organisational reform have their own stories and language. Actors use narratives to describe the circumstances that necessitate change, argue how particular reforms can remedy these circumstances, justify the form of change in normative terms and engage in a party's cultural politics through situating each of these elements within an understanding of a party in and in relation to time. In this way, episodes of organisational change are not just about decision-making, rationality or the structures underpinning party processes. Nor are they about finding the methods of leadership selection, policy-making or candidate selection that 'work best'. They are a more complicated web, in which issues of political form, political purpose, party culture and values are intertwined and enmeshed. By examining how these questions have been narrated across time, it is possible to develop an interpretative analysis of how a party's organisational identity has been contested and developed across its history as party elites – and their opponents – have presented their cases for and against certain kinds of structural change. The next chapter considers how applying such an approach within the

context of Labour's organisational politics allows us to better understand the relationship between the Party's structures and its sense of self.

### **3. Labour's Cultural and Organisational Politics**

As a party, Labour has often relied upon particular conceptions of time in order to characterise and make sense of its political identity. Throughout its history, notions of tradition, heritage, and renewal have underpinned its ideological and cultural character and rooted the Party in the past. The Party's foundation, its antecedents in earlier struggles such as those of the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs', Ramsay MacDonald's 'betrayal' in the 1930s and the legacy of the Labour government of 1945 are each examples of pasts that have been evoked and rallied around by various sides of Labour's internal divides and the Party as a whole.<sup>1</sup> More recently, architects of New Labour clearly sought to carve out a distinct (and to an extent separate) identity from the 'old' politics of the Party's past.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously, Labour's socialist and social democratic thinking has often seen the Party looking toward an egalitarian future yet to be achieved and pushing ideas of forward movement and 'progress'.<sup>3</sup> In all of this, the Party's relationship with past, present and future are central to the way Labour's politics and culture has been articulated and performed. And yet, the ways in which these notions have shaped Labour's *organisational* politics are yet to be fully explored.

The importance of time to Labour's political thought, culture and language has been reflected within the existing literature on the Party, especially in recent years. Earlier accounts of Labour's political culture tended to treat party organisation and its associated identity and culture as static rather than historically contingent and shifting. Newer work on Labour's language, uses of the past, ideology and temporality have made substantial advances in our understanding of how time features within Labour's politics and underpins its internal life. However, thus far, this literature has focused on policy platform and ideology at the expense of party organisation.

As an organisation, Labour has been particularly unsettled when it comes to questions of structure and form. Indeed, this thesis focuses on the period between 1979 and 2014

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<sup>1</sup> See Claire Griffiths, 'Remembering Tolpuddle: Rural History and Commemoration in the Inter-War Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, 44, 1997, pp. 144-69; Jon Lawrence, 'The Myths Labour Lives By', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). pp. 341-66.

<sup>2</sup> See Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: Continuity and Change in the Making of New Labour*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*. (Oxford, Clarendon, 1998). pp. 417-455; Emily Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).



because the Party went through successive and intense episodes of organisational change in these years. Labour's Conference, candidate selection processes, methods of leadership and NEC election, and policy-making procedures each went through multiple reforms at the hands of different leaders and different groups. As McKenzie noted in relation to the internal strife that erupted in the Party in the early 1980s, much of this debate and change has revolved around the 'intractable...problem of party democracy.'<sup>4</sup>

This chapter argues that, despite the developing scholarship exploring Labour's culture and temporality (often conducted by historians), the literature on Labour's organisation has retained the focus on issues of structure, decision-making and power struggles typical of political science. The result is a broad emphasis on the way party structures and organisational change have affected the distribution of power within Labour. Whether in relation to the union link, Electoral College method for electing the leadership, mechanisms of candidate selection, Labour's Conference or other policy-making processes, scholars have focused on explaining their functions, the process of change and the impact of change largely in material and power-oriented senses. Within this literature the specific context of Labour's organisational characteristics has of course been a key concern, with its trade union roots and the perennial tensions between the Party's movement politics and the goal of parliamentary power and governance. These approaches are useful for tracing the battles behind organisational change with Labour, how processes of election, selection and decision-making have changed over time and the consequences these changes might have for the material distribution of power within the Party. However, they have not been able to capture the intense and often public nature of the debates about Labour's organisation, nor the way they have revolved around stories about how the Party relates to its past, present and future as a political organisation, and about the values it should imbue in its political practices.

By adopting the narrative approach outlined in the previous chapter in the analysis of Labour's organisational politics, we have much to gain in our understanding of the Party. Through analysing the stories elites tell when they are instigating and contesting organisational reforms, we can understand how Labour's organisational identity has developed and the way that elite visions of Labour as a political party have shifted and changed through history and in relation to conceptions of time. This chapter begins by

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<sup>4</sup> Robert McKenzie, 'Power in the Labour Party: The Issue of Intra Party Democracy', in Dennis Kavanagh (ed.) *The Politics of the Labour Party*. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1982). p. 191.

outlining the existing literature on Labour's cultural and temporal politics, before reviewing the research that has focused specifically on the organisational politics of the Party.

### **Labour's Identity, Culture, Language and Temporality**

A number of important studies have focused on the relationship between Labour's identity, culture, language and temporality. Such accounts are valuable in their engagement with the Labour Party as an inherently social and meaningful political endeavour and reveal a great deal about the narratives that shape the Party's internal life. However, few of these accounts focus explicitly on the internal politics of the Party in organisational terms, despite the importance of rules and structures and organisational reform to Labour's politics historically. As a result, the competing visions of Labour's organisational form and identity and the ways in which these shift and change over time remain poorly accounted for.

Significant work has sought to characterise the culture underpinning Labour's internal life. Drucker emphasised in 1979, in relation to Labour's political thought and practice, the importance of considering the wider landscape beyond ideology and its manifestations in Labour. In place of focussing solely on the Party's 'doctrine' of socialism and social democracy, Drucker emphasised the importance of distinguishing between such ideological elements central to political goals and an 'ethos', derived from experience, that underpins the way in which Labour goes about its politics and relates to the past.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, Drucker argued that a crucial aspect of the Labour Party's ethos is the emphasis placed upon party rules and that this stems from the Party's roots among the working class, and specifically its links with the trade unions and co-operatives through which they first found political expression. This work was an important first step in considering the politics of the Labour Party beyond its espoused commitments to socialism or social democracy. However, whilst he acknowledged the importance of temporal divisions to the divisions on the British left and the cultural shifts beginning in the late 1970s, Drucker's account imposes a largely static view of the Labour Party as an object and undertheorizes the way in which language and Labour's political culture and identity are

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<sup>5</sup> Henry M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979).

related. The result is an analysis that, whilst insightful, understates the fluidity and contingency of Labour's politics and its identity.

Others have focused on earlier periods of Labour's history and how the Party's culture and identity was formed. Matthew Worley has brought together multiple instructive contributions on the birth of the Labour Party and its history before the Second World War in *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*. Here, several scholars have charted the variety of forces and influences that came together in the forging of Labour's political identity and organisational form in this crucial period.<sup>6</sup>

Some academic analyses have drawn more heavily on anthropological approaches to understanding Labour's organisational culture and identity formation. Florence Faucher-King, within her work on British party conferences, has interrogated the ways in which party Conference in particular has been a site of change, and how the Labour Party adhered to a wider trend of 'fetishizing' the use of ballots and individualising party processes.<sup>7</sup> Faucher-King is not alone in her consideration of Labour's symbols, though other research has tended to focus on the symbolic politics of the Party in wider senses. In *Sacred Cows and Common Sense*, Tim Bale scrutinises the relationship between Labour's strategy and symbols when it comes to the trajectory of its welfare policies and puts forward a framework for understanding political parties that attempts to bridge statecraft theory and cultural grid theory.<sup>8</sup>

Others have emphasised the importance of Labour's founding culture and identity in explaining the trajectory of Labour's politics in broader senses. Cronin has argued that it was these very foundations and Labour's unique culture that made Labour's road to recovery in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so long.<sup>9</sup> He describes how 'Labour's identity as the embodiment of the working class and its institutions, whose defence not only preceded the commitment to socialism but helped shape it, ensured that the Party would be slow to innovate and reluctant to abandon the goals and rhetoric bequeathed by its past.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Worley, (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party*. (Abingdon, Routledge, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Florence Faucher-King, *Changing Parties: An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Tim Bale, *Sacred Cows and Common Sense: The Symbolic Statecraft and Political Culture of the British Labour Party*. (Farnham, Ashgate, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> James E. Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: The Labour Party and its Discontents*. (Harlow, Pearson, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

Such an account bears clear relation to other earlier works on the Labour Party as the expression of working class development, culture and interests. In a series of *New Left Review* articles, Anderson and Nairn sought to account for the extent to which the Labour Party, and its apparent failure to challenge the basis of British capitalism, should be understood in terms of its particularism vis-a-vis its continental counterparts and its negative outlook, discomfort with engaging with theory and its embeddedness within trade unionism.<sup>11</sup> Together, each of these elements constitute 'labourism', a term that Anderson and Nairn did not themselves coin but sought to vigorously revive and reassert. Others, Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones most notably, suggested that the Labour Party's politics and its internal dynamics were in themselves of a more historically fluid and contingent nature, not a consistent feature reducible to a single term.<sup>12</sup> Covering similar terrain a year before Labour's 1997 landslide, Eric Hobsbawm wrote of the complex landscape of Labour's own identity politics and history, and the need for the Party to construct an inclusive vision in order to achieve genuine transformation in government.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars have taken approaches that focus more explicitly on the relationship between language and Labour's politics, though hardly any work has been conducted in this mode in relation to its organisation. In the context of the Labour Party in particular, Colin Hay has argued that a greater focus needs to be placed on the relationship between the discursive and the material when it comes to interpreting Labour's politics.<sup>14</sup> Labour's organisational politics are an important part of this dynamic and worthy of greater examination in this light. In order to understand Labour's identity, it is crucial to consider what the relationship between the Party's organisational structures and the language through which these elements are justified, argued over and debated tell us about how the Party sees itself.

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<sup>11</sup> See Tom Nairn, 'The Nature of the British Labour Party I', *New Left Review*, 27, 1964, pp. 38-65; Tom Nairn, 'The Nature of the British Labour Party II', *New Left Review*, 28, 1964, pp. 33-62; Perry Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *New Left Review*, 35, 1966, pp. 2-42.

<sup>12</sup> Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, 'The Labour Party and Social Democracy', in Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.) *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*. (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). pp. 320-30.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Identity Politics and the Left', *New Left Review*, 217, 1996, pp. 38-47.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Hay, 'How to Study the Labour Party: Contextual, Theoretical and Analytical Issues', in John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam (eds.) *Interpreting the Labour Party: Approaches to Labour Politics and History*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003). pp. 182-96.

Existing work on Labour's language contains valuable contributions on the discursive sources of its political visions in more explicitly ideological senses. This is a further crucial arena within which Labour practices itself and determines what it is as a party. Norman Fairclough, drawing on his own theoretical contributions to the study of discourse and politics, explored the language of New Labour. In doing so, Fairclough placed critical focus upon the importance of rhetorical style and language to the way in which Blair and those around him sought to affect social change and simultaneously restrict the forms this change could take.<sup>15</sup>

Alan Finlayson has interrogated the discursive and rhetorical foundations of the New Labour project on the basis that 'politics is concerned not only with deploying the force of words in order to achieve some desired effect but in giving force to words so that their usage can come to have such effect.'<sup>16</sup> Within this analysis, he examined the temporally rooted claims to 'modernity' and the representations of its relationship with history that were essential to its public language. Through this rhetorical performance, Finlayson argues, New Labour was built around a dialogue between the discursive and the material, within which particular visions of what it meant to be 'modern' were used to justify its approach to government, the nation and political economy in such a way as to exclude other possible alternatives.

Yet, whilst sophisticated, both Finlayson's and Fairclough's analyses were limited to New Labour and did not focus on the importance of Labour's internal life as a party or its organisation. Building on a resurgence in the study of political rhetoric, which stemmed in great part from Finlayson's wider contribution, various analyses have sprung up on the rhetoric of the Labour Party. However, such work has continued to focus primarily on the spoken word and is yet to place any real attention to the Party's organisational politics.<sup>17</sup>

Other scholars have concentrated on issues of temporality within the Labour Party, and examined how time has featured both within arguments about political platform and identity, and in relation to Labour's political thought. Nick Randall has argued that

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<sup>15</sup> Norman Fairclough, *New Labour, New Language?*. (London, Routledge, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> Alan Finlayson, *Making Sense of New Labour*. (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2003). p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> See Judi Atkins, *Justifying New Labour Policy*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Judi Atkins, 'Narrating One Nation: The Ideology and Rhetoric of the Miliband Labour Party', *Politics*, 35:1, 2015, pp. 19-31; Andrew S. Crines and Richard Hayton, (eds.), *Labour Orators from Bevan to Miliband*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015); Judi Atkins, (ed.), *Voices of the Left: Rhetoric, Ideology and the Performance of Politics*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

understanding New Labour and its difficult legacy is impossible without considering the relationship that the project had with time, through its use of historical narratives and selective memory. Distinctions of ‘new’ and ‘old’ Labour were essential to the capacity of New Labour to draw a line between itself and the past, but its disconnectedness with developed visions of Labour’s history greatly hampered the Party’s ability to have a clear sense of New Labour’s legacy after Blair’s departure.<sup>18</sup>

In studying Labour’s political thought, others have also noted the relationship between language and time. Jeremy Nuttall has surveyed how time and temporality in particular have featured within the diverse political thought and ideology in the Labour Party in its history.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, Nuttall points out the way in which different short-term and long-term timeframes often sit behind Labour’s ideological goals. These timeframes are often in contrast both within particular ideological traditions and between Labour’s left and right.

Others have acknowledged the importance of understanding ideologies in relation to their particular context, rather than measuring them against academic descriptions of doctrinal components. In relation to New Labour in particular, Mark Bevir has argued that in order to understand its ideological basis, it is crucial to recognise that ideal types of ideologies rarely measure up to the constantly shifting, changing and mutating manifestations of notions of social democracy present in the beliefs of its key actors.<sup>20</sup> And, in establishing a framework for exploring the relationship between party ideology and identity renewal, Steve Buckler and David Dolowitz have highlighted how the evocation of historically-rooted conceptions of other ideologies provided continuity within Labour’s claims to ‘newness’ under Blair.<sup>21</sup>

Jon Lawrence has described the ways in which ‘myths’ have formed an important part of the political life of the Labour Party. Shared stories about episodes in the Party’s history have come to form important markers of the Party’s identity and provide meaningful common ground between the Party’s elites and activists on all sides of Labour’s ‘broad

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<sup>18</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.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Nuttall, ‘Pluralism, the People and Time in Labour Party History, 1931-1964’, *The Historical Journal*, 56:3, 2013, pp. 729-56.

<sup>20</sup> Mark Bevir, ‘New Labour: A Study in Ideology’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2:3, 2002, pp. 277-301.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Buckler and David P. Dolowitz, ‘Ideology, Party Identity and Renewal’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 14:1, 2009, pp. 11-30.

church'. Contrasting myths of 'betrayal' and 'modernisation' have formed important symbols around which various groups within the Party's left and right have come together.<sup>22</sup>

Scholars have also sought to chart notions of 'pastness' in Labour's contemporary politics and to analyse the way in which the past has been drawn upon by its politicians and as part of its political projects. Steven Fielding has argued that to suggest New Labour was a project wholly divorced from the past is to ignore the way its key figures, Blair and Brown included, drew on the past in order to give New Labour a sense of authentic tradition. For Fielding, this stands as an example of the way in which 'history can be the servant of the present' in the Party's politics.<sup>23</sup> Emily Robinson has explored the bond between Labour and history, both through an examination of the way it has sought to document its own past and through a comparative consideration of the way that New Labour and the SDP positioned themselves in relation to the past.<sup>24</sup>

In their exploration of more recent events, Jobson and Wickham-Jones have analysed the way in which nostalgia featured as a part of the 2010 leadership election and in the language of its protagonists. They conclude that 'the past can be the site of struggle for different identities associated with current trajectories.'<sup>25</sup> In this spirit, the leadership contenders in 2010 sought to draw on notions of the past in order to mark out their positions and political identities in the present as the contest unfolded.

Together, this work on Labour demonstrates the importance of notions of time, embedded within language, to the Labour Party and its identity. In particular, it highlights the way that understandings of Labour's relationship with history have often underpinned its present politics and its attempts to project itself into the future. As such, Labour is particularly nostalgic and regularly relies on versions of history to produce and establish senses of itself as a political party.

When it comes to the academic literature on the Labour Party and its language, culture and temporality, interesting and important work has been conducted which sheds a light

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<sup>22</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'The Myths Labour Lives By'.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Fielding, 'New Labour and the Past', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). p. 384.

<sup>24</sup> Emily Robinson, *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics: Past Politics and Present Histories*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Richard Jobson and Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Gripped by the Past: Nostalgia and the 2010 Labour Party Leadership Contest', *British Politics*, 5:4, 2010, p. 543.

on the way that the Party practices itself and articulates its politics. However, little has been done to draw together the relationship between Labour's cultural and identity politics, its language, and its attention to questions of party organisation. Examining the way the narratives of organisational change and organisational form have evolved is crucial to developing our understanding of Labour's politics. Debates about how Labour should organise itself are key sites of identity formation, and organisational issues have been a central theme of the narratives which produce and redefine visions of Labour's character.

### **The Genesis of Reforms and their Consequences**

The substantial amount of work that has been conducted on Labour's organisational politics is a testament to the important place that issues of internal party structure have had in the Party's history and development. Whether as part of larger works focused solely on Labour's organisation, more focused analyses of discrete instances of organisational change or broader historical examinations of the Party's politics, it is clear that party organisation plays an important role in Labour's politics.

As far back as the 1950s, Labour's organisational arrangements have been permeating academic debate and analysis within political science, particularly when it comes to examining policy-making and the Party's particular version of intra-party democracy. In 1955, Robert McKenzie examined the distribution of power within both the Conservative and Labour parties in the United Kingdom. He argued that, though Labour started as an extra-parliamentary movement, the necessities of the British parliamentary system had required that the leadership and the PLP formalise their positions and concentrate intra-party power in their hands.<sup>26</sup> In response, Saul Rose argued in 1956 that Labour's rank-and-file had an important part in the formation of party policy via the Party's Annual Conference between 1952 and 1955.<sup>27</sup>

McKenzie later insisted that Labour's wider organisational history showed that 'it would be far more accurate to say that the parliamentary leaders manipulate the Party organization than that they are manipulated by it' and that the control of Labour's

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<sup>26</sup> Robert T. McKenzie, *British Political Parties: The Distribution of Power within the Conservative and Labour Parties*. (London, Heinemann, 1955).

<sup>27</sup> Saul Rose, 'Policy Decision in Opposition', *Political Studies*, 4:2, 1956, pp. 128-38.



parliamentarians by the Party's Conference was incompatible with parliamentary democracy.<sup>28</sup> Ralph Miliband was adamant in a later intervention in his belief that a powerful Labour Party Conference was the sole mechanism through which the Party's elites could be held to account, prevented from 'selling out' and be forced to justify and articulate policy and the reasoning behind it.<sup>29</sup>

These early contributions were a sign of things to come in the study of Labour's organisation, with their interest in Labour's organisational structures, the distribution of power within the Party and the way in which these arrangements created tensions between intra-party and parliamentary democracy. In this vein, sociological analyses have tended to dominate in studies of Labour's internal politics. This is especially true from the 1970s onwards, when the importance of debates about party organisation increased inside Labour itself, amidst a real heightening of factionalism around issues of intra-party power and democracy.

Dennis Kavanagh later revisited McKenzie's claims about the distribution of power in British political parties, and argued that his analysis had overstated the extent to which the parliamentary wings of both the Conservatives and Labour dominated their respective parties. He also suggested that it was important to recognise the way in which organisational foundations and the development of its mechanisms of internal democracy had reshaped sites of power within the Party and facilitated factional politics, especially as the nature of the Labour's internal politics was shifting in the 1980s.<sup>30</sup> He also suggested that careful attention needed to be paid to the different types of representation that existed within the Labour Party and the different representative claims that are situated within it, in relation to its linkages with the electorate, membership and trade unions.<sup>31</sup>

Within these works, the general emphasis has been on exploring how and why Labour's organisation has changed, how this was agreed and negotiated, and its effects on the distribution of power within the Party. These themes have continued into more

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<sup>28</sup> Robert McKenzie, 'Policy Decision in Opposition: A Rejoinder', *Political Studies*, 5:2, 1957, p. 182.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Miliband, 'Party Democracy and Parliamentary Government', *Political Studies*, 6:2, 1958, pp. 170-4.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis Kavanagh, 'Power in British Political Parties: Iron Law or Special Pleading?', *West European Politics*, 8:3, 1985, pp. 5-22.

<sup>31</sup> Dennis Kavanagh, 'Representation in the Labour Party', in Dennis Kavanagh, (eds.), *The Politics of the Labour Party*. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1982). pp. 202-21.

contemporary studies of the Party's organisational politics and the way power is distributed within the Party.

In *Building New Labour*, Meg Russell covers an impressive range of themes in her analysis of the organisational shifts that underpinned this political project and reshaped the Party as it returned to office.<sup>32</sup> The work manages to cover changes to policy-making, party governance, Conference, candidate selection and analyse the way in which gender representation measures such as the All-Women Shortlist came about and the impact they had. Russell also acknowledges the importance of the 'appearance' of organisational change: the way that organisational change is described and presented and its supposed relationship with party history, and argues that culture and values placed limitations on the extent of reforms that could take place and that the effect of these changes was often greater centralisation. Despite this, members and activists still retained significant capacity to cause the leadership problems through the structures that emerged and increased central control could be attributed as much to a shifting culture as the reforms themselves.<sup>33</sup>

In further acknowledgement of the link between image and organisation, Kelly has argued that the organisational changes leading up to the return of Labour to office in 1997 were a significant element underpinning the wider reconstruction of the Party in the eyes of the electorate. Kelly suggests that, by building a party balanced between central control and wider democratic engagement, the Labour Party was able to go through substantial changes, present itself as renewed but maintain discipline and unity to a substantial extent.<sup>34</sup>

Others have focussed on how the Party has been managed and how issues of internal conflict have been dealt with and avoided through formal rules, party process and informal practices. Eric Shaw focused specifically on the way in which Labour's constitution, organisational structures and rules were built in order to draw clear boundaries between the Party and any left-wing infiltrators.<sup>35</sup> With particular focus on the potential for Communist Party affiliation around the time of the Second World War,

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<sup>32</sup> Meg Russell, *Building New Labour: The Politics of Party Organisation*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 237-55.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Kelly, 'Renew and Reorganise: Party Structures and the Politics of Reinvention', *Political Quarterly*, 74:1, 2003, pp. 109-15.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Shaw, *Discipline and Discord in the Labour Party: The Politics of Managerial Control in the Labour Party, 1951-87*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988).

Andrew Thorpe has highlighted how the consistent opposition of Labour's leadership and officials to Communism eventually resulted in their expulsion from the Party in 1946.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, Shaw's work on Labour's more recent history has argued that, during the early years of the New Labour government, party centralisation hampered the ability of members to take part in policy-making processes. Despite never realising their espoused goal of an involved membership, this centralisation aided in avoiding the kind of confrontations that had often occurred between a Labour government and the Labour Party beyond it.<sup>37</sup> Ultimately, this disconnect contributed to New Labour's abandonment of some of the core principles that its members continued to believe in, and otherwise may have seen implemented.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis Minkin's wider body of work on the Labour Party Conference and on the trade union link have become classics in their analysis of the role of Labour's central organisational body and the way that power in the Party is distributed. In *The Labour Party Conference*, Minkin surveys how, in material terms, the power and influence of Conference over Labour policy and decision-making varied over time.<sup>39</sup> Whilst its importance as the central focus of policy-making had declined by the late 1970s, it remained a significant body by virtue of its ability to set agendas, provide a platform for members and activists, choose NEC members and impact party governance. Furthermore, in policy terms, Conference 'could have major consequences' even where the Labour leadership did not adhere to the decisions it made by providing an alternative canon of policy around which members and parliamentarians could gather.<sup>40</sup>

A significant amount of the literature on the organisational politics of the Labour Party has focused specifically on changes in the structure and form of Labour's link with its affiliated unions. This is perhaps unsurprising given that this relationship has often been a source of controversy and contention both within the Party and for Labour's political

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Thorpe, 'Locking Out the Communists: The Labour Party and the Communist Party 1939-46', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25:2, 2014, pp. 221-50.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Shaw, 'The Control Freaks? New Labour and the Party', in Steve Ludlam and Martin J. Smith (eds.) *Governing as New Labour: Policy and Politics under Blair*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). pp. 52-69; Eric Shaw, 'New Labour in Britain: New Democratic Centrism?', *West European Politics*, 25:3, 2002, pp. 147-70.

<sup>38</sup> Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*. (Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Minkin, *Labour Party Conference: A Study in the Politics of Intra-Party Democracy*. (London, Allen Lane, 1978).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 318.

opponents. Lewis Minkin's work undoubtedly represents a phenomenal body, in its detailed examination of the form and evolution of the Labour-union relationship. In his substantial volume *The Contentious Alliance*, Minkin traces the way in which rules, roles and relationships have shaped the nature and course of the Labour-union link. In so doing, he laid down a substantial challenge to the idea that the unions dominated the Party, and instead noted that the unions more regularly functioned as a supportive vanguard for the Party leadership.<sup>41</sup>

In recent work, Minkin has applied his sociological approach to understanding Labour's organisation and put forward a lengthy examination of how Labour was managed during the New Labour years. Minkin's account gives unparalleled detail of the internal politics behind John Smith's union link reforms of 1993 and the Partnership in Power package agreed in 1997 after Labour had returned to office. Here, again, the emphasis is on seeking to understand the 'realities' of Labour's organisational form, their gestation and the implications for the way that power is distributed and how the Party governed after 1997. Minkin does acknowledge that, through these changes and beyond, different conceptions of democracy between various groups in the Party exist.<sup>42</sup> However, his main goal is to look behind these at the deeper power battles in play and the consequences these changes might have for the union link, rather than explore the language of these contending accounts of 'democracy' or party reform in their own right.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond Minkin's account, it is also worth recognising that other scholars have made particular efforts to understand both the implications and contests that lay behind some of the most considerable of the 1993 reforms. Paul Webb explored the degree to which these changes constituted or threatened the endurance of Labour's relationship with its founding unions.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Alderman and Carter set out the major sides of the debates between 'modernisers' and 'traditionalists' in this particular episode.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Mark Wickham-Jones has traced in detail, drawing on media sources, the debates and

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<sup>41</sup> Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

<sup>42</sup> Lewis Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: Study in the Politics of Party Management*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> For an effective review of Lewis Minkin's body of work and the questions it raises about the nature of the union link see Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Lewis Minkin's Labours: The Developing Party-Trade Union Relationship', *Political Studies Review*, 14:2, 2016, pp. 175-88.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Webb, 'Reforming the Labour Party-Trade Union Link: An Assessment', *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 4:1, 1994, pp. 1-13.

<sup>45</sup> Keith Alderman and Neil Carter, 'The Labour Party and the Trade Unions: Loosening the Ties', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47:3, 1994, pp. 321-37.

deliberations within the Trade Union Link Review Group (TULRG) in particular.<sup>46</sup> Steve Coulter has argued that, despite these changes and those to Labour's policy-making processes in the late 1990s, the affiliated trade unions still acted as an important break on the free market agenda of the New Labour governments.<sup>47</sup>

Recent research has also explored the union link in comparative context. In Allern and Bale's edited collection on the relationship between left-of-centre parties and trade unions, Webb and Bale argue that, whilst the Labour-union link retains a more substantial institutional weddedness than in other cases, the legacy of the New Labour years was a less coherent and unified relationship, at least until the rise of Corbynism.<sup>48</sup>

Rational choice frameworks have also formed an important part of other attempts to try to understand how and why which the union link has shifted and changed. Such accounts have a limited engagement with Labour's culture. Furthermore, even if rationality were to be considered within the bounds of what is 'culturally rational', this does little to acknowledge the contingent nature and meaningful content of a party's political culture or identity.<sup>49</sup> Quinn argues in *Modernising the Labour Party* that Labour's trajectory of organisational reform can be best understood as the outcome of a series of trade-offs by party leaderships between pursuing electoral goals and responding to the demands of activists.<sup>50</sup> Through a similarly positivist 'scientific' lens, Quinn has also analysed block vote conduct as a form of 'political exchange' through which union funds were leveraged by Labour in return for influence in decision-making.<sup>51</sup>

Labour's leadership election mechanisms and their consequences have themselves also been the target of researchers of the Labour Party and British politics more widely, again without great consideration of the narratives through which these issues have been argued and justified. Quinn has explored, using spatial models, the way that party leaders are

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<sup>46</sup> Mark Wickham-Jones, 'John Smith's Settlement? The Work of the 1992-93 Labour Party – Trade Union Links Review Group', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 47:1, 2016, pp. 21-45.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Coulter, *New Labour Policy, Industrial Relations and the Trade Unions*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Paul Webb and Tim Bale, 'No Place Else to Go: The Labour Party and the Trade Unions in the UK', in Elin Haugsgjerd Allern Allern and Tim Bale (eds.) *Left-of-Centre Parties and Trade Unions in the Twenty-First Century*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017). pp. 246-63.

<sup>49</sup> See Gunnar Grenstad and Per Selle, 'Cultural Theory and the New Institutionalism', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 7:1, 1995, pp. 5-27.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Quinn, *Modernising the Labour Party: Organisational Change since 1983*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Quinn, 'Block Voting in the Labour Party: A Political Exchange Model', *Party Politics*, 8:1, 2002, pp. 207-26.

appointed and removed and how this has changed as these mechanisms have evolved in the major British political parties, including Labour.<sup>52</sup> Covering similar ground, though through an interpretative lens, Heppell has argued that leadership contests in the Labour Party from Harold Wilson to Gordon Brown demonstrate that ideology is a significant factor in the choosing of Labour leaders. In addition, Heppell highlights that, at times of difficulty, the Party has become obsessed with issues of process and legitimacy when it comes to selecting leaders.<sup>53</sup> These leadership contests, and the impact of the mechanisms that have played a part in shaping the outcomes, have also been subject to numerous discrete and isolated analyses within the political science literature.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond Labour's specific relations with the trade unions and its leadership contests, scholars have paid substantial attention the way in which issues of party organisation and party membership intersect within the Party. Paul Whiteley explored the way in which a crisis in levels of party membership played its part in the broader troubles facing the Labour Party in the late 1970s.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently, Seyd and Paul Whiteley then studied the Party's grassroots in greater detail, examining the incentives for party membership in Labour and exploring what drives people to involve themselves as members, what benefits the Party itself sees in this and the ideological differences that exist amongst party leaderships and the grassroots. They argued that incentives best explained the rise and fall of membership levels, and that through these, membership levels could be recovered.<sup>56</sup> Seyd also examined Labour's emphasis on the importance of party members in the 1990s. He suggested that plebiscitary democracy in political parties might become more common, and that the combination of this with the recruitment of new members would likely reinforce the authority and power of party leaderships.<sup>57</sup> More recently, Hugh Pemberton and Mark Wickham-Jones have examined the ebb and flow of party membership levels in Labour, particularly after attempts to increase recruitment towards

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<sup>52</sup> Thomas Quinn, *Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Heppell, *Choosing the Labour Leader: Labour Party Leadership Elections from Wilson to Brown*. (London, Tauris, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> See Henry M. Drucker, 'Changes in the Labour Party Leadership', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 34:4, 1981, pp. 369-91; Henry M. Drucker, 'Intra-Party Democracy in Action: The Election of Leader and Deputy Leader by the Labour Party in 1983', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 37:1, 1984, pp. 283-300; Hugh Pemberton and Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Brothers All? The Operation of the Electoral College in the 2010 Labour Leadership Contest', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66:4, 2013, pp. 708-31.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Whitely, *The Labour Party in Crisis*. (London, Methuen, 1983).

<sup>56</sup> Patrick Seyd and Paul Whitley, *Labour's Grassroots*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Seyd, 'New Parties, New Politics? A Case Study of the British Labour Party', *Party Politics*, 5:3, 1999, pp. 383-405.

the end of the 1990s. They argued the Party's story of membership fluctuation hinged on issues of retention rather than recruitment, and that membership depended much more on political context than 'incentives'.<sup>58</sup>

Others have noted how, particularly in relation to 'modernisation', the consequences of Labour's centralisation had created a party in which this fluctuating membership did not feel engaged or empowered by Labour's internal structures. In 1987, Hillary Wainwright argued that the 'modernising' reforms that the Party's 'moderates' were able to achieve during this period resulted in Labour's organisation becoming one in which the Party's grassroots, and the wave of newly emerging left-wing activism they contained, were increasingly disconnected from any real meaningful influence as a result of a 'headlong rush from collectivism'.<sup>59</sup>

In examining the development of party reforms, such as those that introduced All-Women Shortlists and gender quotas for party positions, several scholars have focused particularly on issues of gender representation within Labour's organisational politics, particularly since the 1980s. Amongst wider work on the impact of New Labour on gender politics, policy and representation, Jill Lovecy has scrutinised how developments in the representation of women in the Party since the late 1970s preceded the mainstreaming of a more substantial women's policy agenda into the Party's platform in the mid-1990s.<sup>60</sup> Sarah Childs has researched the way that All-Women Shortlists were agreed and operated in practice, and the potential they have for impacting both the substance and style of British parliamentary politics.<sup>61</sup>

Labour's organisational politics have also formed a substantial sub-component of broader accounts of the trials and tribulations that have faced the standard bearer of the British left in its history. This is particularly true of those accounts that have charted Labour's journey from defeat in 1979 at the hands of Thatcher to their eventual return to office in 1997. Seyd sought to explain the surge of the left in the 1970s and early 1980s and their relative decline after the 1983 election. In doing so, he argued that effective factional

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<sup>58</sup> Hugh Pemberton and Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Labour's Lost Grassroots: The Rise and Fall of Party Membership', *British Politics*, 8:2, 2012, pp. 181-206.

<sup>59</sup> Hilary Wainwright, *Labour: A Tale of Two Parties*. (The Hogarth Press, London, 1987). p. 301.

<sup>60</sup> Jill Lovecy, 'Framing Claims for Women: From 'Old' to 'New' Labour', in Claire Annesley, Francesca Gains and Kirstein Rummary, *Women and New Labour: Engendering Politics and Policy?*. (Bristol, Policy Press, 2007). pp. 63-92.

<sup>61</sup> Sarah Childs, 'The New Labour Women in the 1997 British Parliament: Issues of Recruitment and Representation', *Women's History Review*, 9:1, 2000, pp. 55-73.

organisation and co-operation greatly aided the left's surge but its reliance on personalities. Despite this, failure to build support beyond the Party and disregard for concerns about issues like entryism ultimately left it in a weak position by 1987.<sup>62</sup> Conversely, Dianne Hayter tracked the way in which the Party's 'moderates' and those on the right managed to recover from a position of relative weakness in 1979 to regaining control of the Party.<sup>63</sup>

Others have sought to set Labour's organisational changes within the wider context of party change, particularly since 1979, as part of more sweeping accounts of the Party's recent history. Shaw has dedicated a significant amount of work to tracing the organisational, communication and policy shifts that contributed to the emergence of New Labour and the Party's return to government. In so doing, he recognised the way in which centralisation and the individualisation of member activity formed parallel goals, but with awkward consequences that particularly impacted upon membership numbers and the health of Labour's organisation.<sup>64</sup>

Through an explicitly historical perspective, Fielding has interrogated New Labour's relationship with continuity and change and sought to 'historicise' it as a political project, including its impact in terms of party organisation. In this account, he emphasised how, even in terms of party structure and management, it would be wrong to conclude that this period of the Party's history was a radical departure in favour of greater central control for the leadership or widespread intra-party democratisation for members. Thus, for Fielding, New Labour's organisational form should be primarily understood in terms of continuity in that the unions remained important protectors of the Labour leadership, and party leaders, whilst re-emphasising central control, could dominate no more so than had previously been the case.<sup>65</sup> This account does a good job of setting New Labour in context and analysing its impact. However, in seeking to divorce rhetoric from 'reality', less attention is paid to the way in which the Party elites sought to define and redefine Labour's identity as an organisation, the conceptions and definitions of democracy upon which they relied, or through the language they used to articulate and justify change.

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<sup>62</sup> Patrick Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Left*. (Basingstoke, Macmillan Education, 1987).

<sup>63</sup> Dianne Hayter, *Fightback! Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979: Crisis and Transformation*. (London, Routledge, 1994).

<sup>65</sup> Steven Fielding, 'Continuity and Change in New Labour'.



Little work has yet been conducted on Labour's recent organisational politics, with a few notable exceptions. The reforms under Ed Miliband radically altered the way in which the unions affiliated their members to the Party and introduced a semi-open primary mechanism for the selection of Leader. One early study, by Jessica Garland, has analysed the implications of adopting 'multi-speed' membership structures within Labour, which has resulted in the emergence of conflicting centres of authority within a party that had already had internal battles over power structures in its past.<sup>66</sup> Garland has also highlighted how Labour's recent experiment with multi-speed organising appears to have been dampened down after party infighting and the rise of the left, with limits imposed on how soon new members or supporters can take part in leadership elections.<sup>67</sup> In addition, Robin Pettitt has also recently demonstrated how Labour's current intra-party dynamics are part of a much longer failure to find a satisfactory settlement when it comes to the involvement of members, trade unionists and party leaders in the drawing up of the manifesto.<sup>68</sup> The historical roots of the concerns about entryism that surrounded the 2015 leadership contest have also been explored in an analysis of shifts in Labour's organisational imagined community.<sup>69</sup> It is hoped that the analyses presented of this particular period within this thesis can contribute to our understanding of how these changes relate to questions about Labour's organisational identity and place these within a wider historical context.

## Research Questions

Together then, there has been a substantial amount of analysis conducted on Labour's organisational politics. However, much of this has been concerned with understanding the development and impact of organisational reforms themselves. This focus has come at the expense of examining the language of reform and the way that the stories Labour's elites tell draw together issues of party organisation and party identity. By interrogating elite narratives in Labour at times of organisational reform, we can see that such acts of

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<sup>66</sup> Jessica Garland, 'A Wider Range of Friends: Multi-Speed Organising During the 2015 Labour Leadership Contest', *Political Quarterly*, 87:1, 2016, pp. 23-30.

<sup>67</sup> Jessica Garland, 'Labour's New Model Party', in Mark Perryman (ed.) *The Corbyn Effect*. (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2017). pp. 68-80.

<sup>68</sup> Robin T. Pettitt, 'The 'How' of Election Manifestos in the British Labour Party', *Party Politics*, 2016. Online First.

<sup>69</sup> Jake Watts, 'The Lost World of the British Labour Party? Community, Infiltration and Disunity', *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

definition take place within visions of party structure and arguments about the nature of past, present and future.

In this vein, the research in this thesis is based around two core questions:

- How have narratives of the British Labour Party's organisational identity developed between 1979 and 2014?
- What does this tell us about the changing ways in which elites have envisioned the Party?

Analysing the ways in which stories of events, the Party's relationship with time and history, and concepts and values are woven together by party elites allows us to understand how this particular segment of Labour's identity has been produced, reproduced and even altered.

#### **4. A Crisis of Identity: The Battle for the Labour Party Machine 1979-81**

In May of 1979, the Conservative Party returned to office and beat Labour back into opposition. Just months before Thatcher's win, Stuart Hall described how Thatcherism responded to the real problems of British society but 'within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically into line with policies and class strategies of the right.'<sup>1</sup> Hall's critical frame would prove too much for some, and debates about this period, and its continuities and discontinuities continue.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, it is fair to say that Thatcherism and the dominance of the Conservative Party in the following decades did play an important part in reshaping the possibilities of British politics. The remaking of the logics of British political economy, industrial and social policy, class politics and its global relationships during the following decades harboured legacies and contradictions that continue to impact upon party politics and governance today.<sup>3</sup>

Within this broader shift in the economic, social and political terrain, the election of 1979 marked an important moment in the history of the Labour Party. Having governed through economic downturn, industrial strife, the Winter of Discontent and negotiated its way through parliament as a minority government, Labour's time in office ended. It had been the party of government since 1974, first under Wilson and then under Callaghan, but lost 50 seats and was returned to the opposition benches. In the course of the 1979 campaign, the electorate absorbed the fundamental differences projected by the major parties, opted to reject Labour's statist approaches and shifted towards the free market individualism argued for by Thatcher's Conservatives.<sup>4</sup> This rejection came in significant part at the hands of traditional Labour supporters from within the skilled working classes and the

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show: The Politics of Thatcherism', *Marxism Today*, January, 1979, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Recent historical research has sought to emphasise the importance of continuities when assessing both the emergence of Thatcherism and the wider idea that 1979 marked a disjuncture in British history. See Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane, (eds.), *Reassessing Seventies Britain*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013); Jim Tomlinson, 'British Government and Popular Understanding of Inflation in the Mid-1970s', *Economic History Review*, 67:3, 2014, pp. 750-68; Kit Kowol, 'Renaissance on the Right? New Directions in the History of the Post-War Conservative Party', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27:2, 2016, pp. 290-304; Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories About Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28:2, 2017, pp. 268-304.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.) *Making Thatcher's Britain*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012); Tim Bale, *The Conservative Party: From Thatcher to Cameron*. Revised Edition. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Pulzer, 'The British General Election of 1979: Back to the Fifties or on to the Eighties?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 32:4, 1979, pp. 361-75.

memberships of trade unions, on whom the Party had previously been able to rely.<sup>5</sup> Labour would not return to office for 18 years.

In the aftermath of this defeat, the Labour Party turned towards issues of party organisation. A major debate erupted about how the Labour Party should select its leadership, hold its parliamentarians ‘accountable’ and put together its manifesto. Tensions over these issues had been building in the previous decade. The return to opposition set the scene for a showdown between the Labour left and party ‘moderates’ over each of these elements of party structure. The result of the battles that ensued was the introduction of the mandatory reselection of incumbent Labour MPs by their Constituency Labour Party General Management Committees (GMCs) in 1979 and the establishment of the Electoral College for selecting the Leader and Deputy Leader at a Special Conference in January 1981. This Electoral College took away the sole right of the PLP to select the Labour leadership. Thus, whilst the left’s attempts to put the manifesto in the hands of the NEC failed, they managed to achieve a substantial transformation of the Party’s structures.

These changes had important implications for the way in which Labour MPs were held to account and the Leader of the Party was selected from 1983 onwards. And, whilst mandatory reselection was eventually abandoned under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, the Electoral College remained, in various altered forms, until 2014. However, this chapter argues that the importance of this episode of organisational reform was not just the structural legacy it left. The terrain covered during the intense fight over these basic questions of party organisation contained a dramatic contest of narrative between the Party’s ascending left and those from the Party’s centre and right. Key actors on either side of this divide told different stories about whether reform was necessary and what any reforms should look like. In doing so, Labour’s elites brought to bear starkly contrasting conceptions of the Party’s identity, its place in history and its proper democratic mission. At their most intense, these divergent stories represent a clash of identities within the Party and a crisis of identity for the Party as a whole.

The Labour left argued that the time for organisational changes had come. They recounted how the course of the Labour governments in the 1970s, and the loss of the election itself, stood testament to the fact that the Party’s organisational form had held it back from

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<sup>5</sup> David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1979*. (London, Macmillan, 1980).

delivering the social transformation to which it was ostensibly committed. Only through ‘real’ democracy, where the movement outside parliament could collectively hold its parliamentarians accountable, could the Labour Party recover and achieve its socialist purpose. For ‘moderates’ who opposed these reforms, Labour’s defeat was not a compelling reason to disempower the PLP. Indeed, for figures like David Owen and Shirley Williams, these changes risked the Party’s fabric as the historic vehicle of the British left and put its commitment to parliamentary democracy in jeopardy.

The narrative clash that took place within this episode had important consequences for both the wider landscape of British politics and the organisational politics of the Labour Party itself. In terms of Labour’s organisation, the language through which these changes were presented, argued and justified by the left signalled the heightened influence of collectivist visions of democratic accountability and the assertion of a particular movement vision of the Party. Across the following decades, ‘moderate’ party elites looked to reimagine Labour’s organisation and move away from these ideas, towards an organisation increasingly defined by stories about the merits of closely demarcated individual participation and balloting, and the apparently incontrovertible value of organisational ‘modernity’. Furthermore, the narrated divisions over Labour’s organisational identity fed into the splitting of the Party, the departure of the ‘Gang of Four’ and the formation of the SDP.

This chapter first introduces the key elements of reform and the major battles that surrounded them. Subsequently, three major narrative themes of the debates over organisational change during this period are analysed. First, the way in which the 1979 election and interpretations of its organisational causes were narrated. Second, the way in which these interpretations and organisational debates were located within different versions of Labour’s past. Finally, the way that different visions of democracy formed the basis of substantial tensions in the resolution of these circumstances.

### **The Rise of Labour’s Left and Organisational Reforms**

Throughout the 1970s, economic and industrial policy were at the heart of a particularly turbulent period in British politics. Initial attempts by Labour to put the British economy on a surer footing revolved around the introduction in 1972 of the ‘Social Contract’. This agreement would set the parameters for wage restraint and lay the foundations for

economic policies designed to recover the country from high levels of inflation and government spending. However, what ultimately transpired was further economic turmoil and an increasingly difficult relationship with the trade unions.<sup>6</sup>

The Winter of Discontent in 1978-9 was the climax of these economic and industrial difficulties. This saw the near-complete breakdown in the relationship between the trade unions and the government with strikes erupting in protest against the imposition of further pay restraint policies. This situation formed a grim backdrop to the General Election that followed in 1979 and proved to be a damaging situation from which Labour was unable to recover. Such a difficult relationship between a government and unions was compounded in its impact, given the importance of these very unions to the Labour Party itself. Thus, damage to government-union relationships in this context also had ramifications for Labour's internal dynamics.

Whilst the Labour's parliamentary left and the Tribune Group of MPs had led internal opposition to the Wilson and Callaghan governments in parliament, calls for reform to the Party's organisation began to grow within the Party's grassroots throughout the 1970s. These calls were based on claims by the left that the Labour government was not implementing policies to which the wider Labour movement was committed, particularly on economic and industrial issues such as pay restraint.

A host of internal groupings sprang up to promote organisational change to 'remedy' this situation. Two of these groups were particularly important and achieved significant influence despite only having modest memberships. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) was established in 1973. This group aimed to reshape fundamentally the organisational foundations of the Party and to secure a greater degree of influence and control for the Party at large. In addition, the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) was formed in 1978 and focused on providing a site of critical discussion of Labour policy and building Labour as a campaigning organisation. Later, in May 1980, the Rank and File Mobilising Committee was established to act as a key hub for the CLPD, LCC and a multitude of other left-wing grassroots organisations in the continuation of the campaign for constitutional change within the Party.

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<sup>6</sup> James E. Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: The Labour Party and its Discontents*. (Harlow, Pearson, 2004). pp. 152-202.

The Campaign for Labour Victory was established in 1977 as an attempt by the right to counteract the other grassroots groups but was largely unsuccessful. Furthermore, Labour's parliamentary right was increasingly fractured in both organisational and ideological terms from the mid-1970s onwards and this aided the progress of the left.<sup>7</sup> However, despite growing calls throughout the 1970s, little serious discussion about reform took place until after Labour's time in government ended in 1979. Debates at Conference and an inquiry into Labour Party organisation established in 1978 resulted in no concrete changes to placate these pushes for reform.<sup>8</sup>

After Labour's General Election loss of 1979, the suppression by many in the leadership of issues of internal party reform lifted. The return to opposition provided time and space for the introspection which had hitherto been avoided. A period of widespread rancorous internal infighting ensued in the following two years, over issues of both platform and party organisation.

Proposals for organisational reform developed rapidly, with clashes at party meetings, in public and on the Conference floor. The Labour Party Annual Conference of 1979 saw a successful passing of a constitutional amendment to secure the mandatory reselection of sitting Labour MPs by the constituency parties in the lifetime of each parliament. This proposal was put to the Conference of 1978 but was not passed when Hugh Scanlon of the Amalgamated Engineering Union mistakenly failed to cast his union's votes. Only a matter of months after Labour had left office, this proposal was passed by 4,521,000 to 2,356,000 votes. This vote was allowed to take place after the 'three year rule' was relaxed, which would otherwise have prevented this taking place due to its rejection in 1978. In addition, the principle of franchise-extension for leadership election was agreed, though the exact details of what this meant were deferred to an inquiry on intra-party organisation. This came on the back of compromise by the Labour left, who had realised early on that an Electoral College was more likely to be secured than the election of the Leader by the Party's Conference that they had originally been seeking.<sup>9</sup> An article in

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Meredith, *Labours Old and New: The Parliamentary Right 1970-1979 and the Roots of New Labour*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008). pp. 42-70.

<sup>8</sup> For detailed descriptions of this factional politics see Patrick Seyd, 'Labour Party Reform', *The Political Quarterly*, 49:1, 1978, pp. 38-43; David Kogan and Maurice Kogan, *The Battle for the Labour Party*. (Kogan Page, London, 1983). pp. 40-57; Patrick Seyd, *The Rise and Fall of the Labour Left*. (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987). pp. 76-99.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Seyd, 'Rise and Fall', p. 109.

*The Economist* proclaimed, after Labour's fractious Conference, that there was 'a year to save Labour's sanity'.<sup>10</sup>

After this decision, attentions turned to the Commission of Inquiry that was established at the Conference of 1979 and the question of how to best bring to a close the fractious issues of leadership election and decide who should control the manifesto. Figures from all sides were dissatisfied with the conduct and composition of the committee, and it was ultimately limited to directing the NEC to present a range of options for discussion at the 1980 Conference in Blackpool and at the 1981 Special Conference in January at Wembley.

These debates resulted in changes to the method by which the Leader of the Labour Party was elected. The result was a system in which the election of the Leader would no longer be the sole prerogative of the PLP. Instead, the Labour Leader and Deputy Leader would be elected via an Electoral College where the Trade Unions held a 40% stake, whilst the CLPs and PLP held 30%. This reform occurred in three stages, with the agreement of the principle of franchise-extension taking place in 1979, agreement on the principle of an Electoral College in 1980 and the final agreement on this formula in January of 1981 at a Special Conference where a variety of different weightings and options were proposed. These included the possibility of a 50%, 25% and 25% split for the PLP, trade unions and affiliated societies, and CLPs respectively, a further option of an equal weighting of a third each for each of these categories or the choice of an Electoral College based solely on the individual votes of party members.

The abstention of the AUEW under Terry Duffy effectively secured victory for union dominance in the mechanism. A report in *Labour Weekly* described how, 'to the surprise of their leaders, the trade unions are to have the biggest vote in the Electoral College.'<sup>11</sup> The result itself was not anticipated and many trade unionists themselves had not expected to hold the plurality of votes. Despite the success of the Electoral College, the proposal for NEC control of the manifesto was narrowly defeated at the Special Conference of 1981. Its failure has been attributed to the inability of the Left to whip up the same level of enthusiasm as it managed to on the other issues at play<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> 'A Year to Save Labour's Sanity', *The Economist*, 6th October 1979, pp. 27-8.

<sup>11</sup> Geraldine Hackett, 'The Leading Votes', *Labour Weekly*, 30th January 1981, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Seyd, 'Rise and Fall', pp. 121-4.



Several key figures from the Labour left facilitated the push for organisational changes throughout this period. Tony Benn was the leading light of the Labour left during this time and he acted as a mouthpiece for the pushes for organisational change agendas of the LCC, CLPD and other elements of the newly organised left. Alongside him, a series of other left-wing Labour MPs and NEC members supported moves to try and secure reform including Dennis Skinner, Joan Maynard and Eric Heffer. In addition, key General Secretaries from Labour's affiliated unions were supportive of the left's cause. This included those from unions like National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) that had been at the forefront of organised opposition to Labour's industrial and public spending policies, as well as the substantial Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs though overall the affiliated unions fell in a variety of different directions on the issues as they arose.<sup>13</sup>

Many in the parliamentary party, from both the 'old' left and its 'moderate' wings, remained opposed to any changes to the process for electing the leadership, drawing up the manifesto or selecting sitting Labour MPs for elections, as had been proposed by the left. This opposition was mounted on the basis that these reforms would disempower parliamentarians and reduce the importance of the link between Labour, its members in the House of Commons and the electorate. On this basis, Jim Callaghan and Dennis Healey remained consistent opponents of these reforms in the immediate aftermath of the election defeat. Alongside them, union figures like John Boyd of the AUEW sought to maintain the independence of the parliamentary party. Michael Foot, who succeeded Callaghan as Leader in 1980 in a controversial leadership contest that relied on the soon to be defunct method of election in which the PLP alone decided the victor, pitched himself as a candidate able to unite both wings of the Party.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, he too was largely opposed to organisational reform. In addition, David Owen, Roy Jenkins and Shirley Williams were also all vocal critics of the changes that were secured. They later cited the introduction of the Electoral College in 1981 as a key driver in the formation of the SDP and insisted that the independence of parliamentarians was an essential component of parliamentary democracy.

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<sup>13</sup> See Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1992). pp. 192-207.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Heppell, *Choosing the Labour leader: Labour Party Leadership Elections from Wilson to Brown*. (London, Tauris Academic Studies, 2010). pp. 77-80.

These reforms had several substantial ramifications for the politics of the Labour Party and the landscape of British politics. The cloud of potential deselection hung over Labour's sitting MPs, transformed the Party's internal power dynamic and cemented the position of the left. In addition, the Electoral College meant that the support of the PLP was no longer the most important element in leadership elections once a shortlist of candidates had been settled upon and the unions now held significant sway. This shift underpinned intense debate about Labour's organisational form in the following decades. Furthermore, the introduction of the Electoral College was the final straw for the 'Gang of Four', who announced their departure soon after its agreement. The eventual formation of the SDP contributed to Labour's struggles and Conservative victories from 1983 up until 1997.<sup>15</sup>

However, these contests were not just about power and did not just arise in a series of votes and decisions. Party elites carved out their positions, and their visions of the Party, in stories about Labour's condition, its history and its values as an organisation. Through these stories, this episode of organisational reform saw the exertion of a collective movement vision by the left, amongst much contestation, and a clash of Labour cultures that resulted in a permanent fracturing of the Party.

### **Making Sense of Defeat: Narrating the 1979 Election Loss**

In the aftermath of Labour's election defeat, efforts turned to making sense of the state Labour was in: how had the Party lost? And, could organisational reform (however defined) really lead to a 'better' Labour Party? These questions dominated early debates, particularly in the run up to the 1979 Conference. To the Party's left, and the leading figures of the grassroots movement for party reform, the story of Labour's defeat began with the Labour government itself. Through the 1970s, so they argued, the Labour government had betrayed the will of the Party's Conference, especially on economic and industrial issues such as pay caps. By consequence, the Party's leadership had failed to stick to the correct course and lost the confidence of the electorate. Now was the time to remedy this, by reorganising the Party and preventing the reoccurrence of this betrayal. Though the affiliated trade unions did not agree on what reforms should be made, they

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<sup>15</sup> James E. Cronin, 'New Labour's Pasts', pp. 203-45.

largely supported the view that now was the time to consider the link between Labour's organisation and its defeat.

Party 'moderates', and those who had been in government in particular, were not content with this characterisation of Labour's recent period in office. However, in the face of a growing clamour for reform, they were willing to concede that the time had come for the consideration of organisational issues. In this respect, 'moderates' and those on the Party's right became concerned with defending the last Labour government, whilst arguing that any organisational reforms should be the product of considered change rather than rapid reform.

In July 1979, the left-wing MP Eric Heffer wrote a lengthy evaluation of the position in which Labour found itself in the wake of its General Election defeat. In doing so, he set out a narrative of how Labour had gotten into this position and where it should now direct its energies. In the pages of the *Guardian*, he argued that:

In the circumstances, it would be very strange if the Labour Party failed to conduct serious discussions about its past policies and the method it adopted in arriving at them. It surely cannot be argued that Labour's present organisation is an ideal or perfect one. The truth is that during the period of the last Labour Government, the Government went one way on many issues, whilst the TUC, the NEC and the Conference went in a different direction.<sup>16</sup>

On the back of this, the motivation for considering organisational reform was tied to calls for change amongst the Party's grassroots and from groups like the CLPD and the LCC. In addition to setting out the circumstances Labour faced, Heffer described how it was clear that:

the rank and file members want a greater say in policy and decision making. They want more influence over their MPs. They want a say in who the Leader of the Party should be. They want all forms of patronage ended, together with the abolition of the House of Lords.<sup>17</sup>

For Heffer, the very way in which the Labour government had conducted itself and ignored the Party had led to catastrophic policy decisions that had resulted in the industrial strife that had caused defeat. This was typical of the way in which the Labour governments of the 1970s, and particularly its decisions on issues of pay policy, became an important symbol to the Labour left and those supporting their push for reform. In his address as Chair of the 1979 Annual Conference, Frank Allaun told delegates how:

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Heffer, 'Towards Democracy in the Labour Party', *The Guardian*, 23rd July 1979, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

The feeling was growing up at the grass roots about the parliamentary leaders: "whatever we say they take no notice at all." That is a very serious feeling. A year ago, the TUC Conference almost unanimously rejected the rigid and inflexible 5 per cent wage ceiling. The Labour Party Conference a month later voted equally solidly. But the Cabinet took no notice. Hence the troubles of January and February. That is why Mrs Thatcher is in No. 10 Downing Street at the moment.<sup>18</sup>

For the left, the Labour governments of the 1970s, and the way in which pay and industrial policies in particular were set during the Callaghan administration, were at the heart of the Party's electoral loss and marked a turning point when it came to issues of party organisation.

The left overlapped issues of electoral politics, policy and party organisation in their stories about Labour's period in office. The last Labour government had lapsed from a truer version of socialism. This socialism was essential to the Party offering meaningful solutions, being successful in government and maintaining office. At the Scottish Miners' gala in 1980, Tony Benn spoke of Labour's defeat recounting that:

we lost our vision of an alternative society, and we allowed ourselves to accept that Labour ministers in office was the same thing as socialism in practice. And they are not the same thing. And it was into that weakness and into that gap that Mrs Thatcher was able to move.<sup>19</sup>

Such arguments echoed the claims that CLPs and constituency delegates presented to the NEC and expressed on the Conference floor, and were a constant feature throughout this period. Amongst a raft of resolutions to Labour's governing committee, the Cardigan constituency party stated that 'in our opinion the Labour Party outside parliament is not merely an election machine; it is our right to participate in the formulation of party policy and the administration of party finances at all levels.'<sup>20</sup> And the local party from Leeds South declared that 'socialist policies have neither been advocated nor tried by our last government.'<sup>21</sup> A delegate from Hackney South and Shoreditch CLP argued for the motion for NEC control of the manifesto at the 1979 Conference stating 'of course we want to win elections...But the point of winning elections, and winning power, is to carry out agreed policies, to make fundamental changes in this country.'<sup>22</sup> Such statements are symptomatic of what was an extensive level of disquiet amongst grassroots members over

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<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Seventy-Eighth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1979). p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> 'Tony Benn on Labour divisions', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, First Transmitted 8<sup>th</sup> June 1980. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0009000139004> (Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>20</sup> 'Resolutions', Labour Party Archive, National Executive Committee Minutes, 28th September 1979, Labour History and Archive Study Centre [LHASC]. p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1979', p. 275.

how the leadership of the Party had proceeded in office and how the Party had fared in the 1979 election. The left's story of the betrayal of the Callaghan government had substantial purchase within the Party beyond its elites.

Others representing the affiliated unions on the NEC were keen to push for a significant review of internal structures in the immediate aftermath of defeat, albeit without drawing overtly upon the existing reform agendas of the CLPD. On behalf of the Trade Unionists for Labour, David Basnett signalled that Labour's defeat meant that undertaking an organisational review was now appropriate. As a figure more associated with the 'moderate' wing of the Party than the Labour left, he wrote to others on the NEC, stating that the electoral loss meant that 'now is the time for a fundamental review of Labour Party organisation, structure and finance.'<sup>23</sup> The weight of union voices behind some kind of review was crucial to the progress of the left's demands and the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry, despite the affiliated unions themselves adopting different positions over whether the proposed reforms were desirable.<sup>24</sup>

Those who had held office in the Labour government, and who did not accept the organisational agenda being put forward by the Party's left and newly enlivened grassroots, initially sought to challenge these narratives about Labour's time in office and its achievements in government. In the face of NEC members pushing for a review into party structures after the Party's defeat, Callaghan told them: 'we lost the election because people didn't get their dustbins emptied, because commuters were angry about train disruption and because of too much union power. That's all there is to it...No inquests.'<sup>25</sup>

Pressure for an inquiry, though, proved too great and attempts to stave off mandatory reselection in 1979 were unsuccessful. In the face of this, Callaghan later accepted the need for reviewing party structures but ceded no ground to those pushing for greater control for the Party and its members over the leadership and the parliamentary party. In this spirit, Callaghan proceeded to list the achievements of the last government to delegates at the 1979 Conference, telling them 'I do not wholly accept it myself, but it is put forward and it must be examined – that it was the structural relationships...which were the cause of our defeat.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Letter from David Basnett to Ron Hayward, Labour Party Archive, NEC Minutes, 4<sup>th</sup> July 1979, LHASC.

<sup>24</sup> David Kogan and Maurice Kogan, 'The Battle for the Labour Party', p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Tony Benn, *Conflicts of Interest: Diaries 1977-80*. (London, Hutchinson, 1990). p. 499.

<sup>26</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1979', p. 228.

This was a familiar theme for those in the ‘moderate’ wing of the Party who were seeking to defend the record of the last government and to stave off any substantial shift in the way that the manifesto was composed or in the rights of the PLP to select the Leader and stand as candidates. Shirley Williams, who lost her seat as an MP in the 1979 election but remained on the NEC until her departure from the Party in March 1981, explained that the Labour Party needed to consider how effective its organisation was. However, this meant focusing on other elements of organisation, and not restructuring mechanisms of control, influence or accountability. Instead, she argued that ‘the Labour Party’s organisation has got to be rebuilt...we’ve got to put our finances right, we’ve got to have a reasonable individual subscription’ as well as a host of other practical issues surrounding membership and party process and conduct.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, whilst the left argued that giving more power to the rank-and-file of the Party, via the NEC, their constituency GMCs and an Electoral College would improve the readiness of the Party to win an election and to maintain office, ‘moderates’ were reluctant to agree. For example, Callaghan told a Labour Party rally in South Wales in 1980 that, ‘for the National Executive Committee to arrogate to itself the sole responsibility for the manifesto would be a recipe for continued agitation and division.’<sup>28</sup> The idea that substantial organisational reform, of the sort most vociferously advocated by the Party’s left, could be a real solution to defeat never took hold amongst ‘moderates’ or those on the Party’s right. Instead, they argued that pushing ahead with these changes could result in internal strife that made a Labour Party victory less likely.

Indeed, the assumption that the Labour leadership had done wrong by not following the decisions of the Party Conference was continually challenged. Denis Healey explained in the aftermath of the final decision at the Wembley Special Conference in 1981, that the idea that a Labour government could not arrive, in good faith, at policy different than that adopted by the Party’s Conference was misguided. He described how, ‘in my experience, if you use your head in your party’s service, even if that means sometimes doing things they don’t approve of at the time, you’ll be alright.’<sup>29</sup> For the Party’s ‘moderates’, and

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Labour Party Constitution’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 1979. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0012900045016> (Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>28</sup> ‘James Callaghan on Labour’s Future’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 1980, Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0004600172001> (Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>29</sup> ‘Denis Healey on the Issues Dividing Labour’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1981. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0001400418001> (Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

those arguing against these reforms, the left's cries of betrayal were founded on a complete misunderstanding about the practicalities of government.

Despite 'moderate' attempts to challenge the narratives of the left, the left continued to drive the process of organisational change. They did so in reference to characterisations of the Party that went beyond its immediate political circumstances, and delved into particular conceptions of the Party's broader history and its democratic ethos. In particular, Labour's left envisioned a party that had been dogged by a similar pattern of leadership betrayal through its history and that needed to reassert the importance of its movement roots.

### **Warnings from History: Movement Betrayal, Settled Questions and Parliamentary Necessities**

Whilst an important part of elite stories of reform revolved around the necessity of change, references to party history formed a crucial theme through which questions of organisational reform were debated. Through these histories, the Party's structures were brought to life as actors on both sides of the debate sought to bolster their arguments about organisational change by drawing on the 'warnings' and 'lessons' of times gone by.

Many in the 'moderate' wing of the Party and on Labour's right sought to emphasise, to various degrees, the more conservative lessons to be drawn from the Party's history. Tensions between the PLP, Labour governments and the wider party were argued to be a part of the Party's genetic make-up and difficult to change. Past episodes of internal strife were a spectre that 'moderates' invoked in their concerns about where debates about internal party power might lead. And, the actions and views of Labour figures from the Party's history were used to emphasise the Party's historical commitment to the independence of parliamentarians.

In contrast, the left of the Party placed what they saw as Labour's present organisational crisis within a history that stressed the need for a substantial rethinking of power within the Party. They argued that it was not just the failure of the Labour government in the 1970s that demonstrated that reform was required, but articulated a longer history of betrayal when it came to the relationship between the leadership and the Party's

Conference, unions and grassroots. According to them, Labour needed to be salvaged from this with organisational change.

For those supporting the push for change and forging a party in a vision of collective control and parliamentary delegation, these reforms had historical roots and purpose. In 1979, Neil Kinnock held a position on both the NEC and in the Shadow Cabinet, and was an active member of the Tribune group of MPs on the Party's left. He described in an interview at the 1979 Labour Conference how the arguments taking place over party organisation were part of a historical process that was not bound to the time of electoral cycles:

These arguments have gone on a lot longer than the weeks and months since May the 3<sup>rd</sup>. And, indeed, longer than Jim Callaghan has been Leader of the Labour Party...The debate really didn't start from May the 3<sup>rd</sup> and won't be concluded by the election of the next Labour government. It's something that goes quite beyond that. It's about the Party itself and how we arrange programmes, what relationship the Party has with its parliamentary members and a whole new dimension of democracy both for this Conference and the Party elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, Labour MP Frank Allaun, CLPD supporter and Party Chair, outlined to the Conference in 1979 the need for organisational change, and reflected on the history of the apparent problem of the Party leadership ignoring the wishes of party members. He told delegates that:

This is not a new thing in our movement. I remember 1970 very well. There were resolutions on our agenda all demanding that the leaders, whether in Government or Opposition, should respect the wishes and decisions of the Party member. This was opposed by the majority of the then National Executive Committee. Harold Wilson asked to speak against it at the Conference, which he did. Despite that, the resolution was carried – and promptly ignored. It remained on the shelf.<sup>31</sup>

The Labour left continually constructed their argument about the legitimacy of their programme for reform through this use of the past. The necessity of party reform was not just presented as a product of the present Labour found itself in, but an attempt to remedy a historically rooted problem that had been haunting the Party for some years. In a similar vein, Eric Heffer subsequently argued to the 1979 Conference that history was a motor for change rather than a warning against it:

If we look over the history of our party, we will find that from time to time, usually at periods where there have been either Labour Governments or a decisive shift within the Party, constitutional questions have come up...It may be, comrades, that in order

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<sup>30</sup> 'Labour Conference – Speeches and Interviews', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, October 1979. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0013900562001> (Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>31</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1979', p. 169.



that we can sharpen our instrument of the Labour Party that it is necessary to change the constitution.<sup>32</sup>

This interpretation of history continued in the narratives of the left as the process of organisational reform continued, and as they sought to remedy the supposedly recurring disregard that Labour's leaderships had held for the wider body of the Party. Tony Benn told Conference in 1980 that 'I am more concerned with the future than I am the past', whilst reiterating that:

we in constituencies that have not got a Labour MP are giving notice that we want to be involved in the election of our Leader and in formulating our Party manifesto. We know we have not been in the past. For the Party to have any credibility we first have to let our party workers play a meaningful part. The election of a Leader, involvement in the manifesto and mandatory re-selection will bring this about.<sup>33</sup>

This claim was centred not just in a vague reference to the past, but in an authority rooted in experience, as Benn asserted his analysis on the basis of his attendance 'at the Clause IV meeting that drew up the 1964, 66, 70, 74, 74 and 79 manifestos.'<sup>34</sup> The weight of this historical experience, and all of this change, meant that exerting greater control over Labour's parliamentarians and its senior leadership was warranted. Only through this, and by acknowledging this past, could the diagnosis the left put forward be resolved.

This proposed resolution, particularly when it came to the Electoral College, was not welcomed by all. Indeed, the increased involvement of the trade unions was a particular point of contention. This was especially the case when it was decided in 1981 that the affiliated unions would hold the lion's share of the votes in this new arrangement at Conference, in which the votes of many of these unions were themselves crucial. For the left, however, both the involvement of the unions in these reforms and their inclusion in the Electoral College was justified as a result of the special relationship between the Labour Party and organised labour. When challenged about this in the aftermath of the 1981 Special Conference, Judith Hart argued that:

We've got to understand the history of the Labour Party...the Labour Party itself was born out of the trade union movement. We were the political wing of the trade union movement...We have a very special kind of history in our Labour movement here.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Seventy-Ninth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1980). p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> 'Unions Gain Majority in Electing Labour Leadership', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1981. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0002400396001> (Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

Similarly, those who spoke of potential division by drawing on turmoil caused in other European social democratic parties by changes to structures of intra-party democracy were told by NEC member and Labour MP Dennis Skinner that ‘the Labour Party was born out of the trade union movement. They decided at the beginning of this century that they needed a political wing.’ Because of this history, any comparisons were ‘completely out of step with the true nature of our party.’<sup>36</sup> For the Labour left then, the introduction of mandatory reselection and the Electoral College, and the unsuccessful push for NEC control of the manifesto, addressed Labour’s historical problems whilst remaining true to a vision of the Party as rooted in trade unionism and the wider labour movement.

However, whilst the Party’s left drew on history in order to underscore the specific problems of the Labour Party, and the necessity of instituting reforms to stop past events repeating themselves, those who positioned themselves against reform and against the disempowerment of the PLP charted a different historical narrative altogether. In so doing, they drew on a conservative vision of Labour’s past experiences and gave voice to party figures of years-gone-by in order to underscore the need for careful consideration and freedom for parliamentarians.

In the aftermath of the election and in the period when he remained Leader, Callaghan was particularly resistant to calls for reform. He argued to the NEC that the pressures facing the Party were not only historically rooted but part of what Labour was. He described how they ‘didn’t lose the election because of the manifesto. Read the Conference proceedings from 1932 and 1951. The Labour government and the Party never gel together very easily.’<sup>37</sup> Outwardly, at Conference in 1979, Callaghan presented an extension of this argument by placing the root of disconnect between Party wishes and Labour government actions in Labour’s early years:

There is nothing new about this problem. Our old friend, Manny Shinwell, was telling me on Sunday that he himself raised the issue, before he got into Parliament when he was a young delegate at a Conference in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 1906 or 1907 I believe, 60 or 70 years ago.<sup>38</sup>

Callaghan used history to argue that the problems presenting themselves at this moment, after a difficult election defeat, were not new. But he drew the opposite conclusion to the

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<sup>36</sup> ‘Labour Conference – Dennis Skinner on Leader Selection’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, c. October 1980. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0017300178001> (Accessed 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Tony Benn, *Conflict of Interest: Diaries 1977-80*. (London, Hutchinson, 1990). p. 525.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1979’, p. 228.

Labour left: this friction had emerged throughout history and had never led to a fundamental change, precisely because it was not in the end required, desired or wise.

Michael Foot walked a finer line between histories of movement and party than that charted by Callaghan, seeking to defend the rights of parliamentarians and Labour as a parliamentary force on the one hand and acknowledging the importance of the Party's union roots on the other. He did this consistently, first as Deputy Leader and then as Leader after his election by the PLP in November 1980. When speaking at the 1980 Conference in October, where the results of the Commission of Inquiry were presented and extensive debate took place over the organisational proposals it put forward, he stressed to delegates that:

When the Party Conference on one notable occasion tried to instruct Aneurin Bevan, then Minister for Health trying to carry through the great socialist measures of the 1945 parliament, how and when he should introduce a particular measure into the House of Commons, he gave them an elementary lecture on the rights and duties of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Those rights and duties stand today.<sup>39</sup>

After the decision of the Blackpool Conference in 1980, which committed the Party to an Electoral College for leadership election, Foot also defended the rights of Labour's affiliated unions to involvement in party affairs. He described how 'there wouldn't have been any Labour Party at all if it had not been for the continuing support and strength of the trade union movement in this country'.<sup>40</sup> This though, was an acknowledgement of the importance of Labour's union roots in decision-making rather than advocacy for increasing union power within the Party over and above that of the parliamentary party.

As the decisions over organisational reform seemed to be increasingly going in the direction of the left, and the rancour in the Party increased, figures on the right dislocated themselves from the historical references of the left and from compromising 'moderates' like Foot. For David Owen and Shirley Williams, the crisis the Party faced was an existential one that threatened to take it beyond the darkest moments of its history. In August 1980, they wrote that 'the Labour Party is facing its gravest crisis, graver even than crisis of 1931.'<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Speech to Ebbw Vale Constituency Labour Party, Labour Party Archive, Michael Foot's Papers, L28/4, LHASC.

<sup>40</sup> Transcript of World this Weekend 25<sup>th</sup> January 1981, Labour Party Archive, Michael Foot's Papers, L39/2, LHASC.

<sup>41</sup> David Owen and Shirley Williams, 'We Are Not Prepared to Abandon Britain', *The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> August 1980, p. 1.

The prospect of increased union involvement in the Party's affairs did little to convince the harshest critics from the Party's right that the Electoral College represented any form of solution when it came to electing the Party's leadership. Indeed, whilst some 'moderate' figures were willing to pay dues to the important place of trade unions in the Party's history, those who went on to break away from the Party did not draw on this idea of Labour's founding moment in order to justify any such change. Labour's unions roots were rarely evoked and often directly challenged as a source of historical legitimacy. In January 1981, pre-empting the decision of the Special Conference to support giving 40% of the Electoral College to the trade unions, David Owen argued that:

You either trust MPs voting to choose the Prime Minister, or you allow individual paid up members of the Labour Party to do it. What you can't do, in my view, is allow a few major trade unions meeting, often in private, to do a fix and to decide who is going to be the Leader of the Party or Prime Minister.<sup>42</sup>

For figures on the right, Labour's union roots provided no justification for the organisational reforms that emerged. Instead, they further demonstrated the need to reconsider drastically the value of the Labour Party in its contemporary form and its legitimacy as a political organisation. Thus, the different interpretations of Labour's political position manifested in divergent stories about Labour's organisational history and different claims about the relevance of this history to its present conditions. This divergence, around both the necessity of change and the relationship between the Party and its union roots, fed into different arguments about Labour's democratic identity.

### **A Crisis of Democracy: Party or Parliament?**

As the opposing sides built these different stories about whether organisational change could be justified, in both present and historical terms, their narratives fed into a contest over whether the outcomes could be considered true to the democratic values and identity of the Labour Party itself. These divergent ideas about the meaning of democracy and its relationship with Labour's organisational identity were embedded within the narratives surrounding the content of the changes and their potential consequences. Whilst those on all sides of these arguments relied on notions of democracy to justify their case, different stories of Labour's central mission and its relationship with the institutions of the state

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<sup>42</sup> 'Unions Gain Majority in Electing Labour Leadership'.

were presented by the Party's ascendant left, centrists and those on the right who ultimately broke away to form the SDP.

For those on the left like Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, organisational change was required to remake the identity of the Party in a way that recognised more fully its nature as a movement beyond Parliament. From this stemmed an emphasis on collective institutions and on restraining the independence of the parliamentary party by making it accountable to members and activists. The Electoral College, manifesto control and mandatory reselection would all entrench the notion that the PLP was an extension of the labour movement, and not the other way around. Despite the loss of the push for NEC control of the manifesto, by the end of January in 1981 this vision of a collective party democracy, defined by increased control for the Party over Labour's parliamentary wing, was achieved in substantial respects.

For 'moderates', and those that were intent on advocating the rights of the parliamentary wing of the Party, ensuring the independence of Labour's representatives was the only way of providing the Labour Party with a democratic identity that recognised Parliament as the centre of its politics. There were undoubtedly divisions within the arguments of Labour's 'moderates' about how best to respond, particularly over issues of Leader election. Some, like Michael Foot, were content with an Electoral College based on the votes of trade unions, CLPs and the PLP so long as the latter had the decisive share. Other figures like David Owen and Frank Chapple of the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) were intent on securing a contest based on an OMOV principle as an attempt to hold the Party together. Neither of these ideas won out. Ultimately, those who went on to form the 'Gang of Four' argued that the notion of controlling the actions of the PLP and curtailing their independence marked such a radical break with the democratic identity of the Party that it made their position within it no longer tenable. For them, the left's talk of intra-party democracy was an illusion and the tensions it aroused were evidence of a Labour Party whose political identity was now in a state of bankruptcy by virtue of its failure to recognise the primacy of parliament. In this respect, whilst the narratives of the left had played an important part in articulating a renewed organisational identity, the clashing stories of Labour's democracy lay at the heart of a fissure that would reshape the landscape of British politics.

*The Left, the Party and the 'Movement'*

In their articulation of the need for organisational reform, the Labour left relied heavily on the notion that their vision of democracy had the necessary capacities to resolve the underlying problems that caused Labour's defeat and the infighting that had broken out. Indeed, even the growing strife within the Party in the aftermath of the 1979 election was subject to the potential remedying capacity of their collectivist and constraining democratic vision of the Party's organisation. Both Tony Benn and Eric Heffer asserted that control of the manifesto, mandatory reselection and a new method for selecting the Leader could achieve 'unity through democracy.'<sup>43</sup> Heffer took the podium at the 1979 Conference and argued that there was a real need for disregarding scare stories about the possible problems that change might bring, stating that members 'should not be afraid of the issues of constitutional change to strengthen party grass roots democracy.'<sup>44</sup>

In this light, pressing ahead with change became part of an attempt to reassert a movement identity within the organisational structures of the Labour Party. Michael Meacher, MP and leading figure of the LCC, argued to Conference in 1979 that 'the Leader of the Party is accountable, not just to the Parliamentary Party, but to the movement as a whole and he should, therefore, be elected by those to whom he is more broadly accountable.'<sup>45</sup> For the left, Labour was not just a parliamentary force but a party with a much broader base and this now needed to be reflected in its organisational form.

Even in the face of great disquiet and a potential party split, 'democracy' had the capacity to resolve Labour's ills and to prevent a situation in which a Labour government acted independently from the socialist wishes of the Party at large. It was in this vein that Eric Heffer told Conference in 1979: 'I do not agree that the PLP and Labour Governments should affirm any independence from this movement, none at all.'<sup>46</sup> With this radical approach, an increase in the strength of internal 'democracy' – via the introduction of an Electoral College, reselection and NEC control of the manifesto – was hailed as the solution to the story of crisis the left had told. Such a response was portrayed by the left as one that spoke directly to their vision of Labour as both a simultaneously 'democratic' and 'socialist' party. It was on this basis that Benn declared in 1980 that:

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<sup>43</sup> Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, 'Unity Through Democracy', *Workers Control*, 5, 1979, p. 9.

<sup>44</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1979', p. 260.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.

When we talk about the structure and democracy of our Party, we are talking about the lifeblood of democracy...about what it is that gives the Labour Party its moral strength: that it believes power should be shared and not concentrated at the top.<sup>47</sup>

This was a clear statement from the leading light of Labour's left and the grassroots, in which he pushed for a redistribution of Labour's power inside the Party by arguing that the questions that lay before it on these issues were about its very essence; the Party's political identity.

In this spirit, Eric Heffer told delegates that 'if we believe in democracy we believe in the widest involvement in every section of our movement.'<sup>48</sup> However, 'widest involvement', for the left, need not mean direct involvement. Indirect democracy, expressed through delegates and collectivist politics was the most meaningful form of political expression. On the debate on the principle of an Electoral College in 1980, Heffer asked, 'So why should not the rank and file activists of trade unionists through their organisations have some say in who the Leader of the Party is?' The Labour left had a democratic vision for the Party in which the collective politics of its movement-based history dominated. Only this could deal with what Benn later described as the 'problem of a totally independent parliamentary leadership that got into power on the basis of the movement and then kicked away the ladder.'<sup>49</sup> Benn described to Eric Hobsbawm how, without dealing with this problem:

the whole history of the labour movement would have culminated in a mere Cape Canaveral rocket launching function whose sole job would be to fire the parliamentary leadership into orbit whenever there is a General Election and, having discharged its function, the Labour Party like the first stage of the rocket would fall harmlessly into the Atlantic.<sup>50</sup>

Whilst the left failed to achieve their aim of putting the manifesto unequivocally in the hands of the NEC, their argument that Labour was crippled by an uncontrolled parliamentary elite proved persuasive in their drive to change the way leaders were elected and introduce mandatory reselection for parliamentarians.

Furthermore, whilst critics argued that such a focus on democracy within the Party risked undercutting the capacity of Labour's parliamentarians to act as representatives, the left countered that it addressed the wider ills of the United Kingdom's democratic politics.

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<sup>47</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1980', p. 146.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>49</sup> 'Cast into the Wilderness', *The Wilderness Years*, TV Documentary, BBC, First Aired 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1995.

<sup>50</sup> 'Eric Hobsbawm Interviews Tony Benn', *Marxism Today*, October 1980, p. 7.

Benn extended this version of party democracy into a wider vision of parliamentary democracy, in which those elected – regardless of party – need to stick rigidly to their election commitments if they are to uphold the faith of the electorate:

If our efforts are successful, it will help to restore integrity to the process of parliamentary democracy itself. People, even those who are not Labour, understandably distrust political parties which say one thing in opposition and do something different when they are elected.<sup>51</sup>

This is a somewhat inflexible vision of democracy, in which those in government do not adopt pragmatic approaches or reconsider their positions on policy issues. Instead, parliamentarians are, whether by party members or by the electorate, delegated to carry out the tasks of which they speak in manifestos and on the campaign trail. Accordingly, the recovery of a movement-based collective and democratic politics within the Labour Party would result in both a more authentic Labour Party and a better system of parliamentary democracy. Whilst all ‘moderates’ were concerned about such ideas, for some on the Party’s right, such claims were at the root of the complete collapse in Labour’s value as a force for good.

### *Moderates, Parliament and Practicalities*

In contrast to the ‘enhancing democracy’ thesis put forward by those from the left, others were more cautious about balancing any conception of Labour as rooted in movement with the demands of parliamentary democracy. Callaghan led the initial charge against what the left pitched as a greater level of democratic accountability. Whilst conceding the need for discussion of organisational issues at the 1979 Conference, Callaghan emphasised at length that Labour MPs had a duty to represent a far broader electorate: ‘I affirm the independence of the Parliamentary Party and the Labour Government – at the end of the day they must take the decisions and they are responsible.’<sup>52</sup>

Alongside this, Callaghan and others stressed that giving a greater degree of power to the Party over its parliamentarians clashed with the practicalities of parliamentary democracy. At a meeting of the Commission of Inquiry, he reportedly argued that:

It is not an issue of principle. There are problems – we have got to consider the psychological impact of change. If MPs are reselected and the Leader is elected by a college and the power over the manifesto is taken away, it will damage the Party. If,

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Tony Benn on Labour’s Divisions’.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.



for example, the PLP get a Leader *they* haven't chosen they might not accept him. The system in the SPD in Germany works well but it might not work here. And there are two practical problems. One, who does the Queen send for? She might send for someone else if the PLP don't accept the Leader imposed by the Electoral College. Secondly, if a P.M resigns or dies, can an Electoral College advise the queen?<sup>53</sup>

Such a statement resonated with the revisionist right within the PLP who, as Dennis Howell put it, strongly believed that those arguing for 'democratic accountability' from a left fundamentalist position were 'not in practical politics at all.'<sup>54</sup> Callaghan later emphasised that 'it has always been difficult to argue against this question of electing the Leader on a wider franchise in principle and I've argued against it on practical grounds.'<sup>55</sup>

Michael Foot also found himself at the heart of attempts to challenge the left's imagining of Labour's democratic identity, though he resorted more directly to arguments about the principles of Labour's parliamentarism. In a speech to his constituency party in Ebbw Vale, he argued that attempts to give control of the manifesto to the NEC were far from democratic. He described how:

Democratic accountability is supposed to be the doctrine which underlies the new demand. Rather it stands democracy on its head. Under this system Labour MPs would be elected on a programme that they had not effectively helped to devise and which they would be required to fulfil in a manner and at a pace they would not be able to direct.<sup>56</sup>

He did this by taking the arguments that had been made by the left and turning them back on them by asserting that their notion of democratic accountability was not practical, democratic or socialist. Similarly, David Warburton of the GMWU cast proposals for NEC control of the manifesto outside of the Labour Party's socialist character. He told Conference in 1980 that 'we claim to be the most representative democratic socialist party in the world. It would be a negation of that principle if we transferred this issue solely to the National Executive Committee.'<sup>57</sup> And, the AUEW argued in their evidence to the Commission of Inquiry that wider involvement in the Party from ordinary working people was the 'path to real democracy.'<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980-90*. (London, Arrow, 2006). pp. 8-9.

<sup>54</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1980', p. 138.

<sup>55</sup> 'Labour Party Conference – Jim Callaghan on Leader Selection', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, c. October 1980. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0017300178008> (Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> June 2017).

<sup>56</sup> 'Speech to Ebbw Vale CLP'.

<sup>57</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1980', p. 146.

<sup>58</sup> AUEW Statement to the Commission of Inquiry, Labour Party Archive, Diane Hayter's Papers, DH 1/2. p. 2.

Even in accepting that the outcome of an Electoral College for leadership selection looked likely, Foot continued to use his position as Leader of the Labour Party to argue for a formula that acknowledged the primacy of the PLP and the centrality of parliament to Labour's political mission by giving it 50 per cent of the vote. In the January of 1981, in the run up to the Special Conference, Foot spoke of how he and the PLP wished 'to see a predominant voice kept for the parliamentary party.'<sup>59</sup> Days later, he emphasised to Robin Day the importance of resolving Labour's organisational impasse in a way that was compatible with the rights of the Party's parliamentarians. He expressed that he wanted 'to see the Parliamentary Party having 50% of the vote and 25% to the constituency parties and 25% for the trade unions...Parliament is the central institution, democratic institution in this country and must have these rights'.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, for 'moderates' in the Party, this remaking of Labour's democracy by the left challenged Labour's commitment to the parliamentary road. Even if its movement roots and trade union links should be acknowledged, the primary focus of Labour's democratic identity as an organisation was its parliamentary wing and, ultimately, its connectedness with wider society. On this occasion, this vision did not win out. Despite this, the idea that forging a more representative party meant moving beyond collectivist visions of Labour's identity returned in subsequent years after the Party began to emerge from its 'wilderness' years.

### *The SDP Rupture and Representative Democracy*

Whilst the victory of both mandatory reselection and the establishment of an Electoral College did signal the dominance of a collectivist and movement-led vision of the Labour Party's democratic identity, this was not the only immediate consequence. For those who later became part of the 'Gang of Four', all of whom were on the right of the Party, notions of a disempowered and controlled PLP ultimately marked a rupture in the democratic spirit of the Labour Party to the extent that it lost its legitimacy as a political force. Undoubtedly, a host of different issues lay behind Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, David Owen and Bill Rodgers decision to leave the Party and form the SDP, not least issues of

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<sup>59</sup> Transcript of World in Action, Labour Party Archive, Michael Foot's Papers, L30/2/5, LHASC. pp. 5-6.

<sup>60</sup> Transcript of a Recorded Conversation between Michael Foot and Robin Day, Labour Party Archive, Michael Foot's Papers, c. 22nd January 1981, L30/2/5. p. 5.

economic and foreign policy.<sup>61</sup> But these organisational issues, and questions about Labour's commitment to national institutions of democracy, formed a crucial part of the way that they articulated the necessity of the creation of a new political party.

These figures on the right were beginning to build these narratives soon after Labour's defeat and the 1979 Conference, and were central to their explanations throughout. Shirley Williams wrote at length, a matter of weeks after the election in 1979, of the way that the word 'democracy' was being bandied around as part of arguments that were compelling but fundamentally detached from any 'real' notion of what democracy is:

There is a case for greater democracy within the Labour Party. But proposals that would down-grade the Parliamentary Labour Party, end its joint control over the contents of the manifesto, and make MPs accountable not to their electors, not even to their party members, but to a few dozen men and women on the General Committee, are not democratic. They are elitist, and Labour has never believed in an elite, however great the merits and however sustained the efforts of that elite may be.<sup>62</sup>

Williams was adamant, in her counter to the narrative of the Labour left, that their ideas of democracy were not just detrimental to democracy in the abstract but that they subverted the true anti-elitist democratic identity of Labour as a political party.

In November of 1979, after mandatory reselection had passed, Roy Jenkins told of the way this mechanism was a fundamental challenge to Labour's commitment to true democracy. He described how in such an organisational structure:

there is no real democracy, or respect, for representative parliamentary government, in suggesting that tiny groups of perhaps 20 or 30 activists should have power of political life or death over a member who has been elected by 20,000 or 30,000 constituents and whose fault is not lack of personal effectiveness but the advocacy of political views which are probably much closer to those of the 20 or 30,000 than to those of the "people's court" of 20 or 30.<sup>63</sup>

Beyond this particular organisational issue, Jenkins also argued that the wider debate on control of the manifesto and leadership selection pointed to a party of deep dysfunction. He suggested that Labour had become an example of a situation where 'internecine warfare is the constant and major purpose of a party's life'. Consequently, 'the response in such a situation in ...should not be to slog through an unending war of attrition, stubbornly and conventionally defending as much of the old citadel as you can hold, but to break out and mount a battle of movement on new and higher ground.'<sup>64</sup> And, in 1980,

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<sup>61</sup> See Ivor Crewe and Anthony King, *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Shirley Williams, 'The Road to Elitism', *The Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1979, p. 12.

<sup>63</sup> Roy Jenkins, 'Unfreezing the Pattern of Politics in Britain', *The Guardian*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1979, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

David Owen wrote that he could not countenance what he perceived as Labour's departure from a previously 'unshakeable commitment to representative democracy' as a result of the introduction of mandatory reselection for Labour MPs and the agreement to of an Electoral College principle.<sup>65</sup> He and Shirley Williams argued together that 'this time the far left wants no compromise. It is seeking not only to dominate the Party, but to destroy representative democracy itself.'<sup>66</sup> For these figures, the drive of the left to change the Party threatened to usurp the proper relationship between parliamentarians and their constituents, and their capacity to exercise their judgement.

By the time their departure was impending in 1981, issues surrounding Labour's organisational change had formed a fundamental plank of the logics of their narrative of divorce. At the Special Conference in January 1981, Owen argued that the only way to rescue the situation was to commit to a leadership election system where only every individual party member would have a vote. He asked delegates to reconsider or else force the Party to split: 'why not look at this again and produce a procedure which is practical, which we can finance, and which trusts individual members of the Party?'<sup>67</sup>

When his warning was not heeded, he took to *Question Time* to explain the need for the creation of a new centrist force in British politics. He explained that 'the Wembley Conference was certainly disastrous but that isn't the only reason by any means. It is the cumulation of a whole range of constitutional decisions.'<sup>68</sup> By pursuing this course, Labour had 'ceased to be a coalition' and those looking to break away were now 'talking about the creation of a social democratic party, of a distinctive left of centre party with an identity, roots and traditions of its own.'<sup>69</sup>

By the end of January 1981, the 'Gang of Four' had set out their narrative of a Labour Party whose authenticity and value had collapsed. In the Limehouse Declaration, which formally announced their break from the Party, they described a party that would now be dominated by the unions and how 'the Conference disaster is the culmination of a long process by which the Labour Party has moved steadily away from its roots in the people

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<sup>65</sup> David Owen, Letter to Ron Hayward, Labour Party Archive, L/27/10, LHASC.

<sup>66</sup> David Owen and Shirley Williams, 'We Are Not Prepared to Abandon Britain'.

<sup>67</sup> Julia Langdon and Colin Brown, 'Owen Warns Against Block Vote "Disgrace"', *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1981. p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Transcript of David Owen on Question Time 29<sup>th</sup> January 1981, Labour Party Archive, Michael Foot's Papers, L27/13, LHASC. p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

of this country and its commitment to Parliamentary government.’<sup>70</sup> This declaration marked the end of one story and the beginning of a new one. Owen, Williams, Jenkins and Rodgers asserted a fundamentally different view of Labour’s circumstances, its relationship with its past and its commitment to representative democracy and, in doing so, described the rupture from which they would build their new project.

## Conclusion

Between 1979 and 1981, the Labour Party went through a substantial episode of organisational debate and reform. After campaigns within the Party, Conference resolutions, a Commission of Inquiry and voting on the Conference floor, the Party’s left had changed, with the support of some of the affiliated unions, Labour’s organisational structures substantially. Denis Healey later reflected in his autobiography in 1989 that ‘on the outcome of these arcane rituals depended the future of the Labour Party as a force in British Politics.’<sup>71</sup>

In hindsight, it would be an overstatement to suggest that Labour’s future – organisationally or otherwise – was *determined* by the outcomes of these particular decisions. However, the narratives through which elites from all sides of the Party contested, justified and argued over these particular organisational reforms did mark the beginning of successive decades in which intensive introspection over the Party’s organisational form and identity were frequent. This was particularly the case as the dominant ideas about Labour’s organisational identity shifted and changed as the influence of the Party’s left declined.

Using a narrative approach to examine this period provides us with a clearer picture of the identity politics that was shaping this period and the arguments that were being made on all sides. During this time, figures from the Party’s left, centre and right were making different arguments about what Labour had been, was and should be. The fracturing of identity that this constituted fell over not just normative but temporal lines.

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<sup>70</sup> The Limehouse Declaration, David Owen Archive, D709/2/17/1/3, University of Liverpool Library Special Collections. p. 1.

<sup>71</sup> Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*. (London, Politicos, 1989). p. 473.

The arguments of the left mobilised a particular story of Labour's identity as an organisation and its transformation between 1979 and 1981. Amongst the Party's elites, figures like Tony Benn and Eric Heffer took the lead in articulating problems and solutions. They told stories of a Labour government that failed to adhere to the views of the Party and paid the price. They argued that this was not an isolated incident, but a historically rooted problem that required urgent redress. And, they asserted that collective structures of democracy, such as the introduction of mandatory reselection by CLP GMCs and an Electoral College for leadership election, were the remedies. Through these changes, the Labour Party's identity as a movement could be acknowledged and respected.

On the opposing side, 'moderates' were unwilling to concede that the story of the 1979 election loss laid rooted in any 'betrayal' perpetrated by the Labour government. They sought, albeit largely unsuccessfully, to instead root Labour's organisational politics in a history of Labour as a parliamentary force, and as a political party that had already considered issues of intra-party democracy and settled on placing parliamentarians in a necessarily independent and privileged position. As a result, moves to empower the wider party and to increase 'accountability' were presented as being a challenge to Labour's commitment to the parliamentary road. For some on the Party's right, the threat to parliamentary democracy, and the inadequacy of notions of 'movement', played an important part in their narratives of departure.

In the decades that followed, the left continued to emphasise collectivist notions of Labour's movement roots but found themselves increasingly without impact. In pursuing their own reforms to the Party, 'modernisers' rejected collectivist accounts of democracy and instead told stories about the need for Labour to adapt to history, and to the increasingly individualised notions of democracy and political practices by which organisational 'modernity' was supposedly defined.

### **5. Making Labour ‘Modern’: Organisational Reform and the Rise of Individualisation 1987-92**

In the years between 1981 and 1987, limited organisational change took place in terms of the practices of the Party as a whole. The General Election of 1983 saw the Party suffer substantial losses, as a more left-wing programme and a party reorganised in the name of collectivist movement politics failed to bear electoral fruit.<sup>1</sup> Whilst Michael Foot's successor Neil Kinnock attempted to introduce reforms that would bring in elements of OMOV into party processes surrounding candidate selection in 1984, these were unsuccessful. In the years that immediately followed, these issues were largely pushed into the long grass, with a working group set up in 1985 due to report back in 1987. Instead of substantive organisational change, attentions turned towards negotiating the difficult political context of union resistance to Thatcherism's economic and industrial policies and removing the Militant Tendency from the Party.<sup>2</sup>

In June of 1987 Labour lost its third successive election. Despite what was widely seen as a recovery of enthusiasm within the Party and an effectively presented and communicated short campaign, Labour failed to rise to the top in any pre-election polls and remained on the Opposition benches.<sup>3</sup> What followed was the continuation and intensification of a post-1983 period that has been characterised as one of transformation in many areas of policy and organisation, largely as the result of an increasing marginalisation of the once ascendant 'hard' left in favour of the soft left and right of the Party.<sup>4</sup> In particular, in the period between this defeat and the election of 1992 the Labour Party changed significantly in organisational terms. The major components of these changes centred on the expansion of OMOV, a drive to reform Conference and policy-making processes, and measures to improve the representation of women within party structures.

This chapter argues that, alongside these structural changes, there was an important shift in the language of party organisation during this period. This shift undermined the value

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Whiteley, *The Labour Party in Crisis*. (London, Methuen, 1983). pp. 208-19; David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*. (London, Macmillan, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979: Crisis and Transformation*. (London, Routledge, 1994). pp. 30-5.

<sup>3</sup> David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1987*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Dianne Hayter, *Fightback! Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005).

of collectivist political practices that had been so emphasised by the Party's left, as outlined in Chapter 3. Instead, an increasing emphasis was placed on what Kinnock and his supporters argued to be the remedying capacity of an individualisation of Labour's organisation. Labour's self-styled 'modernisers', coalescing around Kinnock, constructed narratives surrounding the Party's loss, emphasising the changing world that the Party faced and its need to adapt and reach out. Through narratives of 'modernisation', they argued that the gradual spread of electoral processes within the Party through individual balloting, the revamping of Labour's policy-making procedures and the improvement of the representation of women, could close the gap between the Party and the electorate and allow it to function more effectively in contemporary times.

In this notion of the 'modern' existed a vision of Labour's organisational identity that was rooted in the importance of the individual member and spreading participation. They described Labour as a party of pragmatic social democratic adaptation that would 'catch up' with emerging contemporary modalities of party organisation and political practice by acknowledging the increasing legitimacy of individualised participation of party members, particularly through OMOV balloting. This emphasis was not absolute, and a distinct place for unions and collective party institutions was retained, particularly through the Party's Conference and the Electoral College mechanism for selecting the leadership. However, these gradual individualising beginnings, themselves constructed within a wider growth in the prominence afforded to the place of the individual in British politics, had important consequences. In subsequent periods of party reform, the importance of the individual and the legitimacy of individualised political practices became gradually entrenched in the narratives of the increasingly dominant 'moderates'.

For the Party's 'hard' left, who were progressively marginalised when it came to organisational issues during this period, this emphasis on adaptation threatened Labour's capacity to put forward and deliver a genuinely socialist alternative. In the stories they told about the 1987 election, they argued that Labour's defeat was rooted in the failure to offer this alternative and that revisiting issues of party organisation in the way 'moderates' proposed would only prolong Labour's time in opposition. They put forward counter-narratives to 'moderate' stories of 'modernisation', emphasising that such narratives were a neutralising cover to attempt to reduce democracy within the Party and offered little promise in resolving Labour's position. Consequently, they argued that any changes that detrimentally affected their once impactful vision of movement politics and



a party accountable to the extra-parliamentary movement would stifle further the socialist voices amongst the unions and the Party's grassroots.

This chapter first gives an overview of the major organisational changes that were undertaken by party elites during this period, before analysing narratives of Labour's circumstances, 'modernisation' and its discontents, and the gradual unwinding of collectivist ideas of legitimacy in relation to the Party's political practices.

### **OMOV, National Executive Reform and the National Policy Forum**

In the wake of Labour's loss in June 1987, Kinnock and his supporters pressed ahead with their agenda for organisational reform and their desire to restructure the Party. What unfolded was a series of debates around organisational issues. These focused particularly – though not exclusively – on the subjects of candidate selection, policy-making, the weighting of union votes at Conference and the representation of women in positions inside the Party.

The first substantive changes arising from these debates were passed at the Labour Conference in the autumn of 1987, after the working party on extending the franchise had conducted a consultation in which it put forward no fewer than 11 different options for change. The outcome of the Conference vote was the Electoral College system, in which trade unions could hold up to 40%, for selecting candidates in CLPs. This resulted in a substantial reduction in the role of local GMCs in candidate selection, but was not the full OMOV that had been preferred by Kinnock. This was a compromise largely born out of a desire amongst the Party's leadership to avoid conflict with unions. The TGWU, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and General, Municipal & Boilermakers Union (GMB) were in favour of a local Electoral College rather than full OMOV, whilst NUPE was against any change. The Electoral College was eventually settled on as a compromise between union leaders and the Labour Leader.<sup>5</sup> In public argument over these changes, where the 'hard' left and the CLPD fought against all reform, figures like NEC member John Evans MP were particularly forthright in their presentation of the changes and their advocacy for expanding individual ballots. In the following years, the

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Minkin, *The Contentious Alliance: Trade Unions and the Labour Party*. (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1992). p. 247; Meg Russell, *Building New Labour: The Politics of Party Organisation*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). pp. 43-5.

effectiveness of this compromise came under increasing criticism, with the method for selection being effectively abandoned before a full OMOV vote was introduced under the leadership of John Smith.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this limited expansion of balloting, balloting for CLPs in the Electoral College for Leader selection was also agreed in 1988. This change was relatively easy to secure, as it did not impact the union section of the leadership election mechanism.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst this change took place rapidly after the election defeat, further key changes were to take place in the years that followed. 1988 saw the NEC given control over the shortlisting of candidates in all by-elections. This alteration stemmed from the difficulties that had preceded the General Election, especially when a controversial left-wing candidate was selected in the Greenwich by-election which was subsequently lost.<sup>8</sup> 1989 saw Conference commit to the principle of quotas of 40% for women in all internal committees and positions within the Party, and this was eventually adopted fully after a consultation and the passing of a detailed composite at Conference on a system of rolling quotas that was approved by a majority of 98%.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these areas concerning representation and democratic mechanisms, the machinery of the Party was also substantially overhauled with the role and functioning of Conference coming into the spotlight. The NPF was developed as the central component of a new policy-making process. This would allow for a rolling programme and regular discussion of policy issues by a group of elected members representing the constituency parties and affiliated groups, as well as permanent positions for the affiliated unions, parliamentarians, Shadow Cabinet members and other officials. Whilst the institution of the NPF was not confirmed by Conference until 1992, much of the groundwork and the major debates were conducted during Kinnock's leadership after 1987, and it was passed shortly after Smith was elected Leader with little trouble. Alongside this, the reduction of trade union weighting at Conference from 90% to 70% was debated during this period and it too was confirmed in 1992. These organisational changes took place alongside an extensive review of the Party's policy platform and a continuation of the development of a more comprehensive communication strategy.

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<sup>6</sup> See Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979: Crisis and Transformation*. (London, Routledge, 1994). pp. 117-8.

<sup>7</sup> Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Eric Shaw, 'The Labour Party Since 1979', pp. 114-7.

<sup>9</sup> Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', pp. 104-6.

Throughout this period, Kinnock's position was increasingly assured when it came to instituting organisational change and he and his supporters had become adept at negotiating and compromising to secure major goals when it came to party transformation. By 1987, the left of the Party had become increasingly fragmented and lost its ability to defeat the Leader at the NEC. The 'hard' left of Benn and Heffer continued to oppose Kinnock's political direction, revisionism and reform agenda but gradually lost their base of power on the NEC. According to Shaw, the ousting of Militant and the Miners' Strike in previous years eroded the Bennite coalition between the 'soft' and 'hard' left at the top of the Party, and a distinct 'soft' left current emerged amongst the grassroots that meant mounting opposition to change became far more challenging. And, whilst figures like Ken Livingstone did make it on to the central governing body of the Party, this did little to stop the progress of the centrists' agenda.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the left found themselves largely providing opposition from an 'outsiders' position when it came to issues of party reform and organisational transformation. By contrast, the 'soft' left of the Party, which now included figures like Tom Sawyer of NUPE who had become increasingly disillusioned with Bennism, shifted to a more supportive position when it came to issues of party change.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Benn and Heffer's overwhelming loss in their leadership challenge to Kinnock and Hattersley in 1988 only acted to underscore the position and agenda of the Party leadership. Kinnock and Hattersley, and the 'modernising' agenda, received substantial support from the grassroots.<sup>12</sup>

These shifts in the upper levels of the Party were accompanied by changes at the grassroots in terms of support and opposition to organisational reform. In place of the previously important pressure that was applied by the CLPD, the LCC became a key vehicle through which the Party's grassroots could exert pressure for 'modernisation'. Formerly much more aligned with the 'hard' left, the LCC had reoriented itself to a position in greater favour of initiatives such as the expansion of OMOV, and became a key source of support for the Labour Leader throughout his tenure.<sup>13</sup> As a long-serving LCC Chair later described, the 'hard' left refused to engage with review or reform and:

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Shaw, 'The Wilderness Years, 1979-1994', in Brian Brivati and Richard Hefferman (eds.), *The Labour Party: A Centenary History*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). pp. 122-3.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Shaw, 'The Labour Party since 1979', pp. 38-41.

<sup>12</sup> Duncan Tanner, 'Labour and its Membership' in in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). p. 266.

<sup>13</sup> James E. Cronin, *New Labour's Pasts: The Labour Party and its Discontents*. (Harlow, Pearson, 2004). pp. 270-1.

This orientation further marginalised the hard left, who were now attempting a fruitless dual defence of past programme and structure. With respect to the latter, LCC continued to campaign for the extension of OMOV and reduction of the power of the block vote, and our model motion on reform of Conference and policy making was to later form the basis of much of current practice.<sup>14</sup>

As this broader shift in the Party took place, party elites set about changing the stories through which they built their visions of the Party's political and organisational identity. After first outlining the narratives of reconstruction put forward by Kinnock and his supporters in the period after the 1987 General Election, this chapter then goes on to chart the ways in which the seemingly incontestable good of 'modernisation' and notions of individualised and participative democracy came to dominate the Party's organisational debates as the influence of the left declined.

### **The 1987 General Election Loss: Reaching Out, the Need for Unity and Grassroots Demand**

Interpreting the state of the Labour Party formed a key starting point of the narratives leading into organisational reform after the General Election loss of 1987. In particular, Kinnock and his supporters charted the causes of this defeat, and the state of the Party's managerial and organisational structures, in order to articulate a narrative of necessary reconstruction. They argued that the Party's organisation was holding it back from achieving change and building the coalition of support it needed in order to return to government. The main source of opposition to this idea came from the Party's 'hard' left who, having peaked in their influence over organisational debates in the early 1980s, now found themselves in an increasingly ostracised position. Whilst Kinnock and his supporters pushed for change, figures from this section of the Party argued that to pursue change at this time would only damage Labour's capacity to win and subsequently undermine the ability of the Party to transform the evermore Thatcherite landscape of British society.

Early assessments of the election loss amongst the Party leadership attributed it to the success of Conservative arguments that Labour was extreme in policy on issues like defence, extreme in its choice of candidates and that the improvements individuals had

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Thompson and Ben Lucas, *The Forward March of Modernisation: a History of the LCC, 1978-1998*. (London, LCC, 1994). pp. 8-9.

seen in their financial security ‘would be in danger under Labour’.<sup>15</sup> In this vein, whilst Kinnock argued the Party could say no to the ‘non-existent pots of political gold at the end of rainbow coalitions’ he and his supporters were adamant that Labour still had a way to travel in order to be victorious once again.<sup>16</sup> Specifically, retaining its current organisational form was not tenable if it was to win any future election and return to office.

Thus, whilst ‘moderates’ placed on the Party’s policy review, it was made clear by Kinnock and his supporters that returning Labour to office and meeting the electoral pressures the Party faced necessitated substantial structural change to key planks of Labour Party organisation. Without these structural changes, it was argued, Labour would not be able to demonstrate it was a serious and credible alternative to the Conservatives or evolve to meet the new electoral challenges it faced. In reviewing the reasons for electoral defeat in 1987 and mapping out the road back to office for the Party, Larry Whitty made it clear to Conference in 1987 that change, including organisational reform, was a key part of this journey and that ‘we must build on what we did right, and we did a lot right. We must reconstruct the Party in order to win decisively next time.’<sup>17</sup> This emphasis on the importance of party organisation to winning elections continued throughout this period, with the Chair of the 1990 Conference Jo Richardson urging Conference-goers to ‘ensure that our own party machine is at its most effective and most co-ordinated at every level, ready to fight the most important election of our lives.’<sup>18</sup>

This language of party management and of mending Labour’s ‘machinery’ in order to bring about an electoral victory was a new and distinct development from the organisational narratives of the early 80s. The debates after the Party’s 1979 defeat had largely focussed on the ‘practical’ problems an Electoral College or mandatory reselection might present in the context of the British parliamentary system but little was said about party organisation as the means by which elections could be won. By the late 1980s however, this was an increasing focus of the way that centrists were talking about the importance of the Party’s structures.

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<sup>15</sup> Report on the General Election 1987, National Executive Committee Minutes, 24th June 1987. Labour Party Archive, NEC Minutes, LHASC.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Eighty-Sixth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1987). p. 46.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Report of the Eighty-Ninth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1990). p. 3.

Later, two years after he resigned as Leader, Kinnock described how this drive was part of a necessary ‘two innings match to have a hope of gaining victory for the Labour Party.’<sup>19</sup> More recently, when reflecting on this period and the role of a Labour Leader, he explained that, ‘in the end, it is about winning elections...Nothing replaces winning elections.’<sup>20</sup> Bryan Gould later stated that the then Labour Leader ‘became obsessed with the idea of winning.’<sup>21</sup> For Kinnock and his supporters, one more heave could result in a Labour victory. They focused on visions of an effective, campaigning party that was presenting a united front and open to including ordinary voters and listening to their ideas. In the wake of the 1987 election defeat, the need for improving party management, building internal unity and forging an organisational form that would enable Labour to reach out to the electorate were particular points of prominence.

Consequently, party elites supportive of Kinnock, and the Labour Leader himself, argued that in the course of recent years and in the 1987 campaign itself, the Party had shown itself to be no longer fit for purpose and requiring root-and-branch change in order to meet the basic requirements of a political organisation seeking power. These requirements meant being a party able to deal with the strains of office and being a party able to hold together with a basic level of consensus, efficiency and unity. Tom Sawyer summarised this effectively when he wrote that ‘our divisions have been publicly rehearsed and because they are publicised so regularly and with such frequency, they leave a general impression in the voter’s mind that we are not competent to govern.’<sup>22</sup> John Evans, an MP on Labour’s NEC who was leading the push for the expansion of OMOV ballots in candidate selection procedures, noted problems of internal disunity in similar terms. He argued that selection by the CLP GMC ‘increases the danger of caucusing and sectional activities, things which I think most people feel have plagued our party for too long.’<sup>23</sup> Larry Whitty later reflected that ‘the Party machine was cranky – in both senses of the word.’<sup>24</sup> For Kinnock and his supporters, finding new ways to organise

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<sup>19</sup> Neil Kinnock, ‘Reforming the Labour Party’, *Contemporary Record*, 8:3, 1994, p. 543.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Kinnock, Toby S. James and Charles Clarke, ‘Neil Kinnock on Leadership, the Labour Party and Statecraft Theory’, in Charles Clarke and Toby S. James (eds.), *British Labour Leaders*. (London, Biteback Publishing, 2015). p. 323.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The Pursuit of Power’, *The Wilderness Years*, TV Documentary, BBC, First Aired 18<sup>th</sup> December 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Sawyer, ‘Where Now?’ in Jeremy Beecham et. al. *Labour’s Next Moves Forward*. (London, Fabian Society, 1987). p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1987’, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Lord Whitty, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

meant building a new unity and letting new voices in. This unity would, they argued, aid their drive to return Labour to power.

A whole series of reforms were articulated in terms of being able to remedy these problems and demonstrate the readiness of the Party for office. The introduction of the NPF was justified on the basis that its approval would be ‘one more very important message that this party is ready for government.’<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, later into this period the NEC concluded that boosting the position of women within the Party would be, as well as fair, ‘popular with the electorate at large.’<sup>26</sup> Later, Charles Clarke recounted how NEC control over candidate selection in by-elections was sought to stop ‘nutters being selected’ that risked giving an extremist, unprofessional image during elections of national attention and consequence.<sup>27</sup> Each of these remedies corresponded with the ‘modernisers’ diagnosis. Thus, a whole raft of changes that took place during this period were pursued on the basis that they would prepare the way for future electoral successes, by uniting the Party and reconstructing the its image in the electorate’s eyes.

Connected to this were calls for mechanisms to facilitate greater unity for imagined future circumstances, with a renewed emphasis on a consequence of the planned and anticipated electoral victory: preparing for the pressures of governing. This meant considering the appropriateness of Labour Party mechanisms for the conduct of effective government and the maintenance of unity and the development of a constructive relationship between a Labour government and the Labour Party more broadly. The key to solving this proposed problem was the implementation of a rolling policy programme which was to be built through a more discursive and participatory process with the eventual establishment of the NPF. It was on this basis that members of the NEC described that ‘we want to see a system of policy making where responsibility is shared and responsiveness is a two-way process between a Labour government and this party.’<sup>28</sup> This was a response to a general concern that current processes were ineffective, including an assessment that ‘the end

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<sup>25</sup> *Report of the Eighty-Eighth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1989). p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> *Representation of Women in the Labour Party: Report of the Consultative Process*. (London, Labour Party, 1990). p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1989’, p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Labour Party Conference Future Conference Procedures’, Labour Party Archive, NEC Minutes, Organisation Sub Committee, 10th July 1989, LHASC. p. 9.

result of policymaking under the present procedure can be unclear, internally inconsistent and sometimes actually contradictory.’<sup>29</sup>

Beyond these particular assessments of the state of the Party’s organisation, Kinnock and his supporters also drove change by expressing that the wider wishes and demands of party members and supporters were altering. This, they argued, needed to be acknowledged and responded to. Whilst the GMB involved itself intensely in negotiations around the role of trade unionists in candidate selections, on the issue of reshaping Conference and the potential for a future reduction of the block vote it was keen to emphasise its responsiveness to grassroots trade union demands. The leader of the GMB John Edmonds reaffirmed that ‘there is a great tide of opinion within the trade union movement in favour of change and we are trying to catch that tide.’<sup>30</sup>

This sense of grassroots demand for change was also invoked by centrists in their justifications of their proposed ‘updating’ of policy-making processes, with a party report acknowledging the ‘widespread feeling in the Party that in some respects our constitution and the decision-making process have not kept pace with these other changes.’<sup>31</sup> Consultations also fed into this sense of pressure and support for change, as the NEC made clear with its report on support for quotas and affirmative action for women. In this, it was emphasised that a majority of members had ‘endorsed the statement of principle set out in the document.’<sup>32</sup> Thus, the summoning of a grassroots looking to see a reinvented party was often lent upon in order to underscore the legitimacy of the changes that Kinnock and his supporters sought. In reality, the situation at the grassroots was more complicated, though had shifted in favour of the Party’s leadership. Whilst organisations like the LCC was increasingly supportive of the ‘modernisation’ of the Party, and had switched from its alignment with the CLPD, there still existed a relatively diverse range of views at the grassroots level about the best organisational form for the Party.

More broadly, whilst these reforms were focused on improving the situation internally in specific respects, the wider connection between party organisation and renewal was frequently acknowledged and underscored. Larry Whitty wrote in *Tribune* in 1987 that:

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> John Edmonds on Labour Party reform’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1989, Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0006500409007> (Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

<sup>31</sup> *Democracy and Policy Making for the 1990s: Statement by the NEC*. (London, Labour Party, 1990). p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Representation of Women in the Labour Party’, p. 4.



If there is still a fault in the Labour movement, it is that there are too many corners of it; too many decisions are taken by cliques of down bureaucratic back-alleys and are not opened up to new influences and new ideas.<sup>33</sup>

By reinventing the Party, and reshaping its form, it would, it was suggested, be possible to remake the Labour Party and give it a new lease of life. It was not just a case of rebuilding a more efficient party, but pursuing a new organisational identity. Within this renewed party, new thinking that would revitalise the intellectual and practical components essential to the Party's performance and make it more connected with the wider world.

The 'hard' left put forward the most direct opposition to the argument of the 'moderates'. Kinnock and his supporters asserted that now was the time for further intra-party reform and that the changes they proposed were needed for Labour to return to office and to govern effectively. In response, the Party's left attempted put forward a counter-narrative. They argued that the drive of Kinnock and his supporters to try and reform the Party's organisation was an inappropriate response to the problems the Party faced and would only cause infighting at a time when it need to be looking outwards to those relying on Labour to live their lives decently. Ken Livingstone wrote how:

With breath-taking sense of insularity at such a time as this, the Right-wing chooses to give another period of internal constitutional wrangling more priority than the defence of the jobs and services provided by Labour councils and the right of free movement to unite families whose only crime is to be black.<sup>34</sup>

In addition, whilst 'moderates', from both 'soft left' and the right told stories about the need to open up the Party in order to improve its representativeness and to respond to new ideas, ideas about 'representativeness' on the left differed notably. Tony Benn, in charting the existing problems of party organisation, instead focused on the capacity of party structures to represent those from minorities and those involved in newly emerging left-wing activism:

You've only got to look at Conference to realise how unrepresentative it is. Of women, of the black community, of the new social movements. They're not represented at Conference.<sup>35</sup>

In all of this, the left's concern remained largely with engaging with organisational issues within the Party in comparatively insular terms. Whilst many of the elites driving change

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<sup>33</sup> Larry Whitty, 'A Lesson From the Election: Labour Has to Earn the Trust of the British People', *Tribune*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1987, p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ken Livingstone, 'The Ken Livingstone Column', *Tribune*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1987, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> 'Labour Overhaul', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1988. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0010000230008> (Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

were keen to open the Party up to a new, ‘moderate’ set of voices through distinct notions of what membership entailed and how participation should work, the left instead focused on trying to more specific issues of descriptive representation and ensuring that these voices would be heard, acknowledged and acted upon. However, this counter to Kinnock and his supporters was delivered from an increasingly weakened position for the left. Voices arguing against a renewed bout of change, at the elite level at least, became notably fewer. The balance of power at the top of the Party had shifted.

This shift was not completely divorced from the narratives the left were putting forward but was part of a more iterative and complex series of developments. Their declining influence on issues of party organisation was brought about both by their inability to construct a compelling story about party reform in changed political circumstances, and by the erosion of their platform in key party positions. This was, in certain respects, the consequence of other events that were less directly related to issues of party organisation. Seyd outlines how the divisions over Militant and the miners’ strike fed into this fracturing. He also shows how the coalition between the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ left fell apart, and the ‘hard’ left failed to maintain their position as they focused too extensively on internal issues of party organisation.<sup>36</sup> Beyond this, after a third successive defeat, it was clear that the reforms they had secured in the past had failed to bring about any return to government. Their old stories of Labour government ‘betrayal’ offered little to a party that was becoming uncomfortably accustomed to opposition. The left were doing a less effective job at putting together a cogent and compelling narrative for change. They did so from an increasingly defensive position and in a changed environment in which collectivism was becoming increasingly delegitimised.

### **Time for Renovation? Narratives of Modernity and Adaptation**

Whilst centrist’s stories about the state of Labour’s organisation, its electoral defeat in 1987 and grassroots demand for greater involvement, and the need for a better managed and more unified party articulated the Party’s plight, these narratives of Labour’s need to reconstruct itself were inextricable from stories of ‘modernisation’. Kinnock and his supporters surrounded their push for reforms with narratives based on temporal claims

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<sup>36</sup> Patrick Seyd, ‘Rise and Fall’.

about the history of the Party, its failure to recognise and respond to wider change, and the importance of returning to organisational issues in order to develop a Labour Party equipped for the future. In these narratives of ‘modernity’, they argued that only the changes they were proposing would shake off Labour’s antiquity, move it away from the divisions of the past and build the kind of inclusive mass party necessary for Labour to return to government.

Those supportive of Kinnock, and the Labour Leader himself, historicised the problems of party organisation that were imperative to claims about the need for ‘modernisation’. The difficulties of party management and the need for the Party to forge a more effective, efficient and unifying set of processes were articulated as something with definite and clear historical roots. Specific situations in which the Labour Party and a Labour government experienced significant tensions formed an important element of historical memory, and were evoked to justify the search for a new and more unifying settlement in the arena of policy formulation. Identifiable crises of the Party’s past were used to characterise the underlying organisational identity of the Party in temporal terms. Memories of Labour governing in the ‘60s and ‘70s were often evoked. They were used and discussed in order to justify the introduction of the NPF on the basis that such a structure would provide a much smoother and far less antagonistic way of managing the policy process during times of government, moving the Party away from previous struggles. In addition, debates about the process for the selection and reselection of candidates and Labour MPs were rooted within stories of ongoing division around these issues, divisions that needed to be resolved once-and-for-all.

The systems of policy-making that centred on Conference and the act of compositing were characterised by elites supportive of ‘modernisation’ as structures that were rooted in the Party’s past. In other episodes of organisational reform, and for other actors, an organisational affinity with Labour’s roots had been presented as an asset and an advantage. However, for Kinnock and his supporters, the endurance of Labour’s organisational structures was portrayed as a cause for great concern. The party’s policy-making processes were said to have left a crucial component of party machinery in a state of antiquity that was no longer tenable if the Party wanted to succeed.

John Edmonds of the GMB described Labour’s existing policy-making structures as ‘a system designed for the 1920s, which is wilting under the television lights of the 1980s,

and that is no way to make policy in a party of government.’<sup>37</sup> The fitness of Labour, judged by its capacity to function as a governing party, had suffered because its processes of policy-making had stagnated. Neil Kinnock described how ‘we have won a few elections with the old archaic procedures, but we have never succeeded in energising and mobilising a mass party, representative of the people and relevant to the people, with our old procedures.’<sup>38</sup> Labour had, ‘modernisers’ argued, succeeded in the past despite its organisational structures not because of them. Kinnock later remarked that ‘Wilson wrote about the reform of the Penny Farthing machine and then we started winning elections. Then the organisation survived almost unscathed in its pre-Edwardian shape.’<sup>39</sup> The incapacity of party practices to forge an inclusive and energised political outfit was, according to the Labour Leader, affecting its ability to build the elements required for electoral victory and effective governance.

In conjunction with these stories, the past was often presented as danger that would impact negatively upon the Party’s drive to succeed continued throughout this period, especially when it came to the development of the National Policy Forum. Larry Whitty described, when presenting the proposals to Conference in 1990:

There are many in this room who can remember the 1960s and 1970s when this Conference and the Labour government fell out. The party leadership felt able, with impunity, to ignore the views and priorities of the Party and the Conference felt able to engage in knee-jerk reactions and ignore the colossal difficulties and choices that government has to make.<sup>40</sup>

Labour’s experience in the 1960s and 70s had been previously drawn upon by the left in the early ‘80s to argue for increasing accountability and the institution of collective mechanisms to ensure this. Now, this same history formed a part of fabric of memory woven by Kinnock and his supporters to justify the extraction of substantial elements of policy-making from the Party’s Conference floor.

Furthermore, centrists suggested that the debates around candidate selection and the operation and functioning of Conference, and grassroots pressure in these areas, were elements of party history that still required resolution. The arguments over internal democracy and candidate selection were tied to the debates and reforms that had occurred

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1989’, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Kinnock Begins Party Shake-Up’, *The Guardian*, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1990, p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Lord Kinnock, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1990’, p. 108.

in the early 1980s. As NEC member and MP John Evans described when taking part in the Conference debate on candidate selection in 1990:

... I emphasised that the debate about the selection of Labour's parliamentary candidates had been going on ever since the 1980 Conference introduced mandatory reselection for MPs, and the debate still continues. It continues in the name of accountability and democracy within our party.<sup>41</sup>

John Evans borrowed the language of accountability and democracy of the left, and sought to articulate a sense that members' debates from earlier years were lingering on, yet to be completely and satisfactorily resolved. In this argument, a key figure in this period took ownership of the language of the opponents of 'modernisation', repurposed it towards a different vision of democracy and accountability. He refused to accept that the changes to the left secured in the aftermath of the Party's 1979 defeat were in any way conclusive.

In order to resolve these apparent pressures, and to resynchronise Labour's organisational form with contemporary political time, centrist party elites emphasised the value and lessons of broader historical change and the importance of projecting the Party into the future. Instituting the reforms the 'modernisers' proposed would achieve an updated Labour Party ready to face the challenges ahead of it. The spread of OMOV, development of the NPF and the expansion of the representation of women within the Party were each presented in these historically-rooted terms.

In an attempt to persuade the troublesome TGWU of the merits of increasing individual balloting within the Party, Kinnock set the value of these reforms in a wider context of a linear history of progress towards democratic enfranchisement. At their Annual Conference in 1987, he told the trade unionists present:

Now you will hear arguments against it just as those in Zimbabwe heard arguments against the franchise, just as people in this country 150 years ago argued that there should be a property qualification as a precondition for the vote, just as we heard a decade ago in this movement that you couldn't have mandatory reselection, that you couldn't have direct election of the leadership. All those votes, all those views, all those attitudes have been put. They didn't prevail.<sup>42</sup>

The move towards OMOV within the Party was placed within a far wider context of enfranchisement, and the 1979-81 reforms presented as part of this journey of progress that the Party now needed to move beyond. This narrative drew on stories of democracy

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> 'Neil Kinnock Speaking at the TGWU Conference', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1987. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0008500167013> (Accessed 18th July 2017).

both within Labour and in the context of more universal democratic progress. These elements were each understood within an ideational framework that valued ‘change’ to scientific and human development more generally. Kinnock later described, in much broader terms about human progress, how conservatism was the biggest challenge to enacting party reform and without change ‘man would not fly, split the atom, have curative medicine.’<sup>43</sup> The ideas of linear political progress and enlightenment here are positioned as being both crucial to understanding the value of change and, though not inevitable, difficult to consciously and rationally resist. This is symptomatic of the way that the historical narrative that centrists charted was more Whiggish than it was Marxist, with its focus on progress and enlightenment rather than dialectical and deterministic change.

‘Moderate’ elites argued that, if Labour was to reinvent its political identity and meet the demands of the day, then it must acknowledge and accept the righteous history that lay behind the expansion of political balloting. Whilst the push for OMOV was not wholesale, and Kinnock and many of his supporters showed a willingness to act gradually and to compromise, the value of these reforms was often cast in terms that made their eventual adoption seem logically unopposable.

Supportive trade unionists painted a similar picture, albeit within the confines of Labour’s own recent history. Eric Hammond, General Secretary of the EETPU, told his union’s Conference in 1987 how:

A growing constituency of opinion supports our policy of one member, one vote in the Labour Party for the leadership and for the selection of Members of Parliament. Recall the fight against Militant. Initially, our view was blasted. Now hardly a voice is raised in their support.<sup>44</sup>

Labour’s more recent past, and the way that the EETPU had been ‘proved right’, was drawn on to chart the forward vision of one of Kinnock’s key bases of support and the seeming irrefutability of the Party’s journey towards a new orthodoxy of more individual internal balloting.

Broad historical narratives were also used to buttress arguments for improving the representation of women within party structures. Rather than focusing on the history of the Party in particular, these narratives tied ideas about the women’s movement and

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Lord Kinnock.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Hammond Claims Credit for Labour’s Moderation’, *The Guardian*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1987. p. 2.

political progress to the advancement of gender representation through the reform of party structures. Clare Short, who was an NEC member at this time, made this central in presenting the case for quotas for women in 1990:

I think everyone is aware that one of the great moving historical forces of our time, not just in Britain but across the world, is the determination of women to change society... Women in the Labour Party, in contrast to Mrs Thatcher, are determined to make changes that will benefit all women in Britain. In order to achieve this we are also determined that women and men share power equally in the Labour party.<sup>45</sup>

The justification for improving the representation of women in the Party relied on the argument that these changes were a response to the culmination of a set of historical social forces that were far bigger than the Party. It was by responding to this wider shift that the Party could 'modernise' and be a party fit for the future.

The NPF was pitched explicitly in these futuristic terms. Larry Whitty argued that rebuilding the Party would be necessary in order to secure victory at the next General Election. In addition to this, he made it clear to Conference that this journey of change was one firmly rooted within a vision for a future that extended well beyond Labour's next electoral tests:

...we must remember that we are not just reconstructing the Party for the 1991 or 1992 election; we are reconstructing the Party for the whole of that decade and for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>46</sup>

In seeking to construct this party of the future, organisational changes were needed in order to relocate the Labour Party, at the very least, in contemporary times. These types of responses focused on the 1990s as an approaching watershed in party organisation and the yardstick against which any proposed changes to organisational structures in the Party should be measured. According to those driving these changes, the pastness of the Party was an obstacle that needed to be moved out of the way and successive organisational reforms were justified explicitly as antidotes to the antiquated. Just as policy needed to be adapted to current climes, so too did the way in which these very policies were developed. The introduction of the NPF was seen as something that responded directly to these circumstances:

But we are trying not just to change the block vote, we are trying to introduce a much more civilised, sensible, research-based way of making policy within the Party. A

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<sup>45</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1990', p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1987', p. 7.

modern way. So it is not just about the block vote. It is about having policy commissions, well thought out policy and policy that isn't changed every year.<sup>47</sup>

This vision of Labour's policy-making emphasised that discussion and deliberation was to be professional, well developed and rooted in meaningful evidence. This was justified on the basis that such a set of cultures and practices in policy-making terms within the Party would be definitively 'modern'. Alongside this sat the extension of direct member involvement through candidate selection mechanisms, an increase in the strength of their voice at Conference through the reduction of the block vote and their greater involvement in other areas such as the selection of NEC representatives. Together, all of these changes were predicated on the idea that modernising could foster an activism rooted in a wide coalition upon which Labour victory and government would be built.

The left challenged this 'modernisation' and rejected its logics, by arguing it was a cover for centralisation, the abandonment of genuine socialist principles and the practices essential to their success. Whilst 'modernisation' was premised on the idea of organisational transformation leading to a Labour victory, the left asserted that the reforms Kinnock and his supporters proposed would be a substantial blow to the capacity of the Labour Party to live out its socialist destiny and achieve meaningful transformation to British society more broadly. This was emphasised in their narratives that focused on the way that Kinnock's reforms would undo the important shifts Benn and others had achieved in the early '80s, work they claimed was crucial to the victory of a real political alternative to Thatcherism and the radically different political future this would constitute. Thus, the left challenge was not about rejecting any notion of the future altogether, but about opposing what they imagined to be the consequences of centrist 'modernity'.

For the Party's left, centrist notions of organisational 'modernity' were tied to a future without promise. Ken Livingstone argued that the sole drive behind Kinnock's package of changes was his aim to 'to reduce the influence of socialists in the Party.'<sup>48</sup> Without this influence, the true nature of Labour as a socialist party led from the bottom-up was, according to the left, disfigured.

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<sup>47</sup> 'John Edmonds on Labour Party reform', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1989. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0006500409007> (Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

<sup>48</sup> 'Brent MP Renews Attack on MI5', *The Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1987, p. 2.



As Kinnock's policy review took shape, the left were increasingly deploring the links they saw between the supposed 'modernisation' in the Party's organisation and changes to its platform towards a less radical social democratic platform. In this vein, direct challenges to the historical or temporal claims put forward by Kinnock and his supporters from the left in explicitly and singularly organisational terms were relatively few. They opposed the temporal claims of Labour 'moderates' and the Party's right by instead arguing that their own vision for socialism was itself the future, and that acknowledging the importance of the Party beyond Parliament was essential to this. In setting out his candidacy for Deputy Leader in 1988, Heffer described how: 'To argue for socialist policies is not to argue for the past, not to look backwards...Labour is a parliamentary party and we should strengthen our democracy, defend it, and in so doing, accept that Parliament must be augmented by democratic extra-parliamentary activity.'<sup>49</sup> By taking this approach, the left were relying more on the value of their own particular style of politics and ideological commitments as a possible future, rather than directly challenging the ever more effective evocations of 'modernity' in direct terms or by attempting to take ownership of this language for themselves.

The Labour left, now increasingly disconnected from authority or power within the Party, continued to argue for its own vision of Labour's identity in much the same vein as years before. In this weakened state, this previously influential assortment of grassroots activists and Labour MPs did far less to directly challenge the temporal politics that were being cemented by the 'soft' left and the Labour right. Furthermore, the frequency and strength of their summoning of the symbol of the 'betrayals' of the 1970s faded significantly as memories of Labour being in office moved out of view. Instead, the left continued their focus on notions of democratic 'accountability' and their importance to Labour's organisational identity and political worth. But, they had lost an important component of what had made this vision so compelling: their claims of betrayal no longer had real purchase and were largely abandoned because they were incongruous with the Party's situation.

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<sup>49</sup> Eric Heffer, 'We Need Policies which are Bold, Clear and Socialist', *Tribune*, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1988, p. 7.

## **Stories of Unwinding Collectivism: OMOV Ballots, Deliberative Participation and Central Control**

In order to resolve the temporal disconnect that Kinnock and his supporters charted between the Party's organisation and the 'modern' world, centrists emphasised the importance of a steady but substantial renovation of the collectivist basis of the Labour's politics. Whilst elements of collectivist political practices clearly remained, not least through the union link and the Party's Annual Conference, and the new NPF, other important areas were transformed. This transformation was rooted in a narrative of individualisation that placed substantial weight on limited and defined participation for party members centred around individual balloting on the one hand, and greater central control for the facilitation of an electorally and managerially important unity on the other. Where Labour was still considered a movement, the role of individuals in this movement was increasingly emphasised and underscored.

This marked the beginning of a gradual but important departure from the collectivist ideas that had previously defined Labour's organisational practices, particularly in the preceding major episode of reform where the left had dominated, as outlined in Chapter 3. Furthermore, whilst the decline of the left and the rise of the 'moderates' was important to the emergence of these narratives of individualisation, this shift also occurred within a wider political context in which the value of the individual was being increasingly emphasised. Labour's response marked what Wainwright described more broadly as the turn of the 'modernisers' towards 'the religion of individualism.'<sup>50</sup>

In response, those on the Party's left – who found themselves increasingly without substantial influence when it came to issues of party organisation – continued to argue for a collectivist, movement-based politics rooted in notions of accountability and togetherness. They maintained that only through this form of politics could Labour achieve the genuine socialist transformation that, in their view, was at the very heart of the Party's identity and its political mission. Thus, in the 'modernisers'' gradual but important shift towards the individual, they saw the smothering of the Party's real potential.

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<sup>50</sup> Hilary Wainwright, 'The Limits of Labourism: 1987 and Beyond', *New Left Review*, 164, p. 43.

In the language of party ‘modernisers’, who were increasingly secure in their position during the period, came a steady shift towards the legitimacy of individual participation as a solution to the problems that Labour faced in organisational terms. This shift is important in two respects. Firstly, narratives of individual participation, which had been present within some sections of the Party’s ‘moderate’ wing and on its right during earlier organisational debates between 1979-81 and during Kinnock’s attempts to spread OMOV earlier in his leadership, were increasingly dominant. Party ‘moderates’ were no longer just advocating for the independence of parliamentarians and the importance of parliamentary democracy. They were arguing for a particular vision of Labour’s internal workings and its political practices. This turn towards the individual and the importance of individual balloting chimed with wider developments in the both Labour’s ideological thinking and in British politics and society more generally. Secondly, and in the context of the Party’s organisational politics more broadly, this shift in emphasis amongst party ‘moderates’ resulted in a dominant vision of Labour’s organisational identity that contrasted starkly with the collectivist ideas that had been projected at the height of the influence of Bennism and the Party’s left.

From the outset, the introduction of OMOV – or at least an element of OMOV – in the selection of candidates was hailed by ‘modernisers’ as a way of forging a Labour Party able to reach out, rebuild its membership and retain greater connectedness with those that joined its ranks. John Evans MP, an important NEC ally to Kinnock, argued that introducing OMOV or an OMOV element in candidate selection would show Labour as the ‘most democratic party in Britain and laying down the framework for creating a party which welcomes new recruits into its ranks and then gives them something to participate in, real participation.’<sup>51</sup> Kinnock himself argued to the TGWU Conference in 1987 that ‘in a movement which exists to increase the participation of the rank and file, there is no good democratic argument against extended franchises. That is why it is right that it should come and that is why I believe it will come.’<sup>52</sup> In an extension of this, and in a challenge to the accountability argued for by the left, he argued that democratic accountability was not achieved by a reliance on CLP General Committees, but instead that accountability must be rooted within the grassroots more broadly. In this vein, he

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<sup>51</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1987’, p. 17.

<sup>52</sup> David Gow, ‘The Day in Politics: Left Launches Campaign Against Kinnock One-Man, One Vote Plans’, *The Guardian*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1987, p. 4.

argued ‘accountability does not stop at Labour Party General Management Committee meetings.’<sup>53</sup>

This emphasis on intra-party democracy hinged on stressing the importance of individual involvement, increasing Labour’s openness and enhancing its representativeness by connecting it with voices somehow better attuned to people beyond the Party as it was. Where this was not to be achieved through direct balloting processes, it was to be sought through a deliberative notion of policy-making. Florence Faucher-King has described this, particularly in the context of Labour’s Party Conference, as the increasing fetishisation of balloting in the performance of intra-party decision-making.<sup>54</sup>

Evans continued this valorisation of the individual and individual balloting in 1990, when debate about the selection of candidates persisted. In light of concerns about the efficacy of the Electoral College compromise, he argued that the use of full OMOV in candidate selections still had merits worth recognising in that ‘it is a system that is easy to understand and it is a system which is non-elitist and fair.’<sup>55</sup> And, in relation to the introduction of the NPF, Larry Whitty described how such changes would lead to a ‘more serious and deliberative policy making process’ that would bring new voices in.<sup>56</sup>

This particular notion of democracy sat within a rising emphasis upon the individual within ‘moderate’ Labour conceptions of social democracy itself. Key figures such as Roy Hattersley argued that the very purpose of the political change Labour existed to achieve was to elevate the position of the individual and the ability of the individual to exercise their right to choose. This was described as the ultimate goal of Labour’s effort as a party to bring about change.<sup>57</sup> In this spirit, it was made clear in the statement *Democratic Socialist Aims and Values* that individual choice was an important part of Labour’s goal and that ‘unless men and women have the power to choose, the right to choose has no value.’<sup>58</sup> On the pages of *Tribune*, the statement’s main architect Roy Hattersley declared that ‘socialism is the philosophy of individual freedom.’<sup>59</sup> And, in

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<sup>53</sup> Roland Rudd, ‘Labour in Plea for Union Help’, *The Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1987, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> Florence Faucher-King, *Changing Parties: An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1990’, p. 10.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>57</sup> Colin Hughes and Patrick Wintour, *Labour Rebuilt: The New Model Party*. (London, Fourth Estate, 1990). pp. 67-9; Tudor Jones, *Remaking the Labour Party: From Gaitskell to Blair*. (London, Routledge, 1996). p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> *Democratic Socialist Aims and Values*, (London, Labour Party, 1988). p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Roy Hattersley, ‘Socialism is the Philosophy of Individual Freedom’, *Tribune*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1988, p. 6.

*Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*, a similar stress was placed on the importance of liberty as a key Labour objective.<sup>60</sup> This programmatic emphasis was controversial within the Party, and in particular within the left.

It is worth noting that this stress was situated within a logical context of individualisation and individual choice that was increasingly embedded within both the political discourse of British politics and society. By the late 1980s, this discourse owed much to the continued success of the Conservative Party and Thatcherism.<sup>61</sup> In the scholarship on the impact of Thatcherism and its connection with the emergence and conduct of New Labour, there exists significant debate as to whether the ‘modernisation’ of the Labour Party and the development of a ‘Third Way’ constituted a capitulation to this individualisation and consequently encroached upon the capacity of a successful left-wing, collective and class-based politics.<sup>62</sup> Beyond the particularities of Thatcherism in the ‘80s, Robinson et al. have argued that a rising ‘popular individualism’ in the 1970s in Britain provided fertile terrain for this politicisation, though this did not necessarily have to result in a rise of the right and could equally have formed the basis for a more individualistic left-wing politics.<sup>63</sup>

There are also more direct parallels here between the language of Labour ‘modernisation’ and the rhetoric through which Thatcherism responded to industrial strife in the 1980s. Kinnock and his closest supporters had assumed that one consequence of OMOV would be the elevation of ‘moderate’ voices.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, the Thatcher government argued that democracy and individual ballots would be the remedy to the challenges of trade union

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<sup>60</sup> *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change*, (London, Labour Party, 1989).

<sup>61</sup> Several scholars have written on the impact of Thatcherite ideas about individualisation on the collective politics of class and class identity. See Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Margaret Thatcher and the Politics of Class’, in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds.) *Making Thatcher’s Britain*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012). pp. 132-47; Selina Todd, ‘Class, Experience and Britain’s Twentieth Century’, *Social History*, 39:4, 2014, pp. 489-508; Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010*. (London, John Murray, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> See Charlie Leadbeater, ‘Power to the Person’ in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds.) *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*. (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1989). pp. 137-49; Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Class in the Development of British Labour Party Ideology 1983-97’, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 53, 2013, pp. 327-61; Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour’s Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*. (Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2008); Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour*, Revised Edition. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006); Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Discourses of Class in New Times’, *Contemporary British History*, 31:2, 2017, pp. 294-317.

<sup>63</sup> Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, ‘Telling Stories About Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the ‘Crisis’ of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 28:2, 2017, pp. 268-304.

<sup>64</sup> Meg Russell, ‘Building New Labour’, p. 41.

militancy. Rhetoric in this vein underpinned their response to the NUM during the miners' strike and the government's justification for the Trade Union Act of 1984, which impelled unions to ballot members before striking. This was a further emphasis on the individualisation of democratic practice and collectivist politics that struck at the heart of the labour movement to which the Labour Party itself was closely linked.<sup>65</sup>

Together, this turn towards the individual in British society, politics and policy towards organised labour and industrial relations was a wider contextual change within which the arguments of 'modernisers' about the value of individuals within Labour's own organisation were situated. Cumulatively, this change also meant that the wider discursive environment that the Party's left was facing was now considerably more hostile when it came to explicitly advocating for collectivist modes of party organisation.

The 'modernising' elites inside Labour presented their narrative of individual participation as the resolution to the gap they argued had existed between the Party and important sections of the British electorate, upon which the Party depended in order to achieve its goals and return to office. Building this coalition, and reforming the Party machinery, was then a way of catching Labour's praxis up with the necessities of contemporary British politics and equipping the Party for the future. At the 1988 Conference, Neil Kinnock summarised the value of this participative and open emphasis:

Our task now is to collect up those instincts of the British people with an understanding of the closeness and similarity of the identity that we as a movement have with that majority. We can do that, and we can do it not just with policies that are attuned to the times we live in and are there for the future. We can also do it with a party that is bigger, better organised, better financed, a party that is reaching out, and welcoming people. That party is our party, a party which serves its members efficiently and values every member, a more democratic party that encourages membership involvement in political education, a democratic socialist party that takes specific steps to promote the full participation of women and the people of the ethnic minorities in a way that no other party will even start addressing. That is the Party that we are building.<sup>66</sup>

By making changes to the way the Party worked, it would be possible to rebuild the Party in a guise fitting for the modern political age. The corollary of this would be a Labour Party making the most of its renewed identity, with strengthened links to people currently disengaged with the Party. A clearer and more defined model of political participation

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<sup>65</sup> See Brian Towers, 'Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions under Thatcher, 1979-1988', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 42:2, 1989, pp. 168-88; Peter Dorey, 'Thatcherism's Impact on Trade Unions', *Contemporary Record*, 4:4, 1991, pp. 9-11; Alastair J. Reid, 'Labour and the Trade Unions', in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). pp. 235-6.

<sup>66</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1988', p. 3.

would, they argued, allow Labour to reach out. Individual balloting and renewed mechanisms of policy discussion – as part of a reorganised policy-making process – were an essential part of making this happen. This was held up against what the then Deputy General Secretary of NUPE Tom Sawyer later described as a ‘Leninist’ style of democracy that had dominated in the Party in previous years.<sup>67</sup>

Of course, the organisational reforms implemented during this period did not just revolve around individual balloting or member participation in policy-making through initiatives like the development and establishment of the NPF, which was designed for representative deliberation. Other initiatives were also introduced to secure the position of the centre of the Party, particularly on issues that could be electorally sensitive or have implications for the image of the Party in terms of internal unity. This was particularly true with regard to the selection of candidates during by-elections. Decisions about shortlisting and selection fell to the NEC after 1988.

Despite this, whilst some of the reforms aimed explicitly to bring about greater central control, in particular over candidate shortlisting, the general thrust of change was articulated through an emphasis on individual involvement and fostering participation. Charles Clarke later summarised this position:

...we did want control in a negative sense to prevent bad things happening. But also, our analysis of the Party was that we had a distorted democratic structure where the basic constitutional arrangement and the way the trade unions operated in various selections and leadership, on policy questions, actually took power away from individual members of the Party. So in general we wanted to, for example, elevate the role of constituency parties and reduce the role of trade unions in the process and we also wanted more electoral processes.<sup>68</sup>

This vision for the expansion of the involvement of the individual party member or trade unionist was not wholesale. Whilst attempts to spread OMOV in particular respects were approved, the framework of the NPF was built around a new body representative of all sections of the Party, and candidate selection was to be done through an Electoral College rather than solely an OMOV vote of party members in their respective constituencies. The block vote of the trade unions was also left untouched.

Amongst this, even the major affiliated unions that were generally opposed to the processes of ‘modernisation’ demonstrated willingness to find some compromise by combining OMOV with union representation within an Electoral College settlement. In

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Lord Sawyer, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Charles Clarke, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

1987, Ron Todd of the TGWU made it clear his view that individualised membership participation could only be justified if a distinct element of trade union representation remained in candidate selection. He told his union in 1987 'trade union participation would never be put aside' and he 'would not vote for one member, one vote, if the trade unions were not part of the new Electoral College.'<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Eddie Haigh, who represented the TGWU on the NEC argued that: '...unions are not fundamentally weak, or in decline, or unpopular. Nor is the legitimacy of union political activity much in doubt. There seems little reason to weaken the Party-union link. In fact, the Party needs the unions more than ever as the workforce and electorate change radically.'<sup>70</sup>

However, by 1989, Ron Todd was describing the value of his own union's political contribution to the Labour Party and how it had 'helped modernise to enhance the voice of individual members' through supporting the extension of OMOV and reforms to the weighting of votes at Conference.<sup>71</sup> He said:

We play a full part in the democratic structures of the Labour Party, which we have helped modernise to enhance the voice of individual members. Our initiatives have included changing the balance of votes at Conference in favour of constituency parties, supporting one member, one vote in reselection procedures and increasing the number of women on our Conference delegation.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, even amongst trade unions that continued to assert their right to a distinct voice in the politics of the Labour Party, there was a gradual move towards justifying Labour's internal organisational arrangements through recourse to the individual and co-operation with gradual individualisation.

In contrast to the 'modernisers' and their supporters, and those in the trade union movement that were willing to strike a more compromising tone, the increasingly marginalised 'hard' left continued to argue that a greater emphasis needed to be placed upon fostering democratic accountability in order to improve the functioning and effectiveness of the Party and to achieve socialist political goals. This meant resisting the encroachment of the individualisation of party processes and advocating the continuation of the involvement of trade unions in the Party's politics through collectivism. In doing so, they relied on a narrative of democratic accountability that bore similar hallmarks to those in previous years, in which a collectivist politics, improved answerability of the

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<sup>69</sup> Roland Rudd, 'TGWU Supports Kinnock on Reform Plan', *The Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> July 1987.

<sup>70</sup> Eddie Haigh, 'Breaking Union Ties Would Destroy Labour', *Tribune*, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1988, p. 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ron Todd, 'A Union for Tomorrow', *The Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1989. p. 20.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



parliamentary party to the wider movement, and the production of a genuinely socialist alternative for electoral victory were described as co-dependent.

Those on the left such as Tony Benn, who had been relatively successful in ensuring the progress of collectivist democratic practices and their notions of strengthening accountability, continued to bemoan the impotence of the voices of the Party outside of Parliament and argued that the decisions of the Party Conference were continually ignored. This problem was characterised by Tony Benn in 1988 when, considering the proposal to extend OMOV ballots to CLPs in the case of leadership elections, he claimed the real problem was that ‘the decisions taken by Conference have no effect whatever on the Parliamentary Labour Party’.<sup>73</sup> Subsequently, he argued that questions about how best to run the Party and produce decisions in almost all respects were best answered through a single collective model of decision making:

I think if this debate is to be meaningful, it’s got to be more than manipulation to produce a certain result. It’s got to be really about having a common Electoral College, which would vote the policy, vote the leadership, vote the national executive, and vote the shadow cabinet, and vote the cabinet so that you would then have a common vote and this terrible division between Labour MPs and the rest of the Party would be ended.<sup>74</sup>

Only through a collective and consistent model of organisation could the ‘real’ socialism of party members and trade unionists break through.

In continued association with figures like Heffer and Benn, the CLPD continued its fight amongst the grassroots in much the same vein. It persisted in arguing for an increase in accountability controls on the PLP and, in this vein, a continuation of the mechanism of mandatory selection by General Committee that it had been key to securing in 1979. Any proposed extensions of individual balloting were the subject of great suspicion, as were attempts to move the site of policy-making to the proposed NPF. In 1987, the organisation attempted to rally support against both full OMOV and the Electoral College compromise which eventually won out, calling on delegates to ‘reject pseudo democracy choices... accountability depends on the people who work with the MP being the people who decide the MPs future.’<sup>75</sup> In addition, they argued that such an outcome would ‘erode still further

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<sup>73</sup> ‘Labour Overhaul’, LBC/IRN Radio Archive, First Transmitted 26<sup>th</sup> October 1988. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0010000230008> (Accessed 8th July 2017).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Parliamentary Selection: Reject Pseudo-Democracy Choices before Conference’, Campaign for Labour Party Democracy Newsletter, September 1987. Dianne Hayter Papers. Box 10. LHASC.

the link between the trade unions and the Labour Party by reducing the input of trade unions at constituency level'.<sup>76</sup>

Left-wing NEC stalwart Eric Heffer MP sought to resist the move away from candidate selection being under the control of CLP General Committees to an Electoral College system that took account of the votes of individual members, arguing that the status quo provided a form of functioning representative democracy. Without this system, the relationship between CLP and Labour MP was unclear, uncontrolled and lacked continuity, meaning 'one is not quite certain who they are going to be responsible to.'<sup>77</sup> For the left, the involvement of individuals at this level of the Party would only let Labour MPs who were unwilling to act on the wishes and decisions of party activists and the movement more widely off the hook.

Left-wing proclamations of concern were not limited to the gradual expansion of OMOV. The development of the NPF was presented in a similar light, likely to lead to a party leadership and a PLP disconnected from the decisions of the wider party. Into the 1990s, Benn continued to argue that the package of reforms being put forward, including those on issues of policy-making, would not enhance democracy but undermine the rights of the wider party to exercise its voice and influence. Benn recounted his arguments to the NEC in his diary in April of 1990 when a proposal on the establishment of the NPF was put forward, describing that:

'...it entirely ignored the role of the PLP, it didn't touch on the fact that, even if the policies came out of the Policy Commission, the Leader had a personal veto on policy, and the commitment of the PLP and a Labour Government to Conference policy was still unclear...This was a centralisation of power which would lead to a powerless NEC. It was designed to neutralise the Party before it got back into power, and it would make us into a sort of Democratic Convention.'<sup>78</sup>

For the left, participation meant little without meaningful control for activists and mechanisms for Labour parliamentarians to be held responsible for their actions. Without this control and 'accountability', the Party was destined to struggle in any attempt to live out its true socialist mission. However, from a marginalised position, this left-wing vision of Labour's organisational identity lost out to the gradual individualising 'modernisation' that Kinnock and his supporters constructed throughout this period.

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<sup>76</sup> 'Preliminary Agenda for Campaign for Labour Party Democracy AGM 1989', Dianne Hayter Papers. Box 10. LHASC.

<sup>77</sup> 'Labour Conference – Candidate Selection', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, c. October 1987. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandradio/lbc/index.php/segment/0123a00185009> (Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

<sup>78</sup> Tony Benn, *The End of an Era: Diaries 1980-90*. (London, Arrow, 2006). p. 590.

## Conclusion

In this episode, the dominant vision of Labour's organisational identity had shifted substantially from that in the years 1979-81, as outlined in Chapter 3. By using a narrative approach to unpick the language of this period, it has been possible to reveal the temporal and normative distinctions through which the identity politics of the Party was developing at this time.

Narratives put forward by Kinnock and his supporters interpreted Labour's electoral defeat in 1987 as a further sign that the Party needed to adapt to changing times, find a more unifying way of organising itself and listen to the demands of its grassroots for greater individual involvement. They pitched 'modernisation' as the antidote to Labour's supposedly antiquated structures. This modernisation was rooted in stories about the value of spreading participation through the Party, particularly through the gradual increase of OMOV balloting and the reform of party policy-making processes. Through this temporal catch-up, they argued for a vision of an up-to-date Labour Party able to reach to out beyond its walls and build the 'moderate' coalition necessary for a return to government.

The party's left, somewhat unsuccessfully, sought to counter these narratives by emphasising the importance of its once-dominant vision of a Labour rooted in, and held accountable to, a sincerely socialist extra-parliamentary movement. The 1987 defeat, they argued, was caused by a failure to offer any real alternative to Thatcherism. They opposed the 'modernising' claims of Kinnock and his supporters on the basis that the reforms they offered would result in no discernibly socialist progress. Instead, the left continued to emphasise narratives of Labour's organisational identity centred upon the need for genuine accountability and for the authentically left-wing voices of the Party's grassroots to be heeded by the leadership. However, from an increasingly marginalised position, these visions held far less importance for the development of the Party's organisation, both during this period and in subsequent years.

In subsequent episodes of organisational reform, modernising notions of individual and closely delineated participation for party members became increasingly entrenched in the organisational visions that were projected by leading elites at times of change. This was particularly impactful during the unexpectedly short tenure of John Smith as party Leader,

a period in which ideas about modern political practices and individual balloting were exercised in the transformation of Labour's relationship with its affiliated trade unions. Thus, the logics of an increasingly individualised political identity for the Labour Party in terms of its organisation during this period paved the way for the reimagining of the Labour-union link in the aftermath of the 1992 election.

### **6. Reimagining the Union Link: Party Reform 1992-3**

Despite Labour's hopes, the 1992 General Election was not the return to office that the Party had wished for. In spite of substantial programmatic and organisational change, the Party was unable to break through at the polls and found itself stuck in opposition for a further 5 years. In the aftermath of this defeat, Kinnock indicated his intention to resign and a leadership contest ensued. From the very outset of this contest, party reform – and reform to Labour's union link in particular – became a key topic of debate. Indeed, whilst Kinnock was the outgoing Leader he himself started the ball rolling on the expansion of OMOV and reform of the block vote. He was to continue his involvement in this process of modernisation as Chair of the NEC.

John Smith emerged victorious from the ensuing leadership contest, defeating overwhelmingly the challenge from Bryan Gould, and Margaret Beckett was elected as the first female Deputy Leader of the Party.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Smith stood by his announced intentions to reform fundamentally the Labour-union relationship. Opposition from within the Party meant that changes were not secured until the Conference of 1993, and even then by a very slim margin. Despite this opposition though, the changes themselves were substantial. The block vote was eradicated in all areas of affiliated union engagement with the Party. No longer could trade unions participate in the election of the Labour Leader and Deputy Leader without consulting their members. Nor could they act as a block at Conference: individual delegates would now wield separate votes. Finally, the defunct Electoral College system for choosing candidates for parliamentary elections was replaced with a system whereby party members would select candidates on the basis of OMOV. Trade unionists could participate as part of this ballot if they paid a top-up fee to become an affiliated member. Though not the focus of consideration here, important changes to candidate selection in terms of gender representation were also introduced in this period with the agreement of All-Women Shortlists.

Various authors have written about this particular series of organisational reforms in the Labour Party and of its union link. In particular, several have focused on analysing the extent to which the reforms changed the nature of the Labour-union link. The argument presented here is that this link was not just changed through structural revision but that,

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<sup>1</sup> See Timothy Heppell, *Choosing the Labour Leader: Labour Party Leadership Elections from Wilson to Brown*. (London, Tauris Academic Studies, 2010). pp. 133-52.

through the narratives of the ascendant modernisers that managed to secure reform, it was reimagined in significant and important ways. This reimagining was part of a wider process, within which elites further developed their narratives of what a ‘modern democracy’ was for Labour. As such, elite narratives in this period built directly on the narratives of ‘modernisation’ that were discussed in Chapter 4.

During this subsequent period of change, both elite characterisations of the political landscape and their evocations of history and constructions of time continued to be important to their presentation of organisational reform. Most significantly, it was through the way that those in the centre and on the right of the Party continued to evolve their narratives of ‘modernity’ and ‘democracy’ that Labour underwent a further shift in its identity as a party. In this shift, the emphasis upon the individual in visions of Labour’s organisation during this period was increased further. This increase took place as the result of a growing emphasis amongst Labour’s elites on the ‘legitimate’ and ‘democratic’ and value of the individual in contemporary British politics in the 1990s.

In their push for change, ‘modernisers’ were clear in their insistence that only an understanding of democracy that increased the role of the individual could now be considered reasonable. In their opposition, unsuccessful and disunited though it was, so-called ‘traditionalists’ in the trade union movement and from the left of the Party, that the ‘modernisers’ were calling out, sought to challenge the notion that collectivist expressions of trade unionism, or at least structures that permitted the distinct voice of trade unionists, had no place in the Party’s politics. However, as the debates took place, it was clear that even ‘traditionalists’ seeking to stave off reform were willing to accept the ‘modernising’ view, at least in part. Thus, Labour’s shift towards a democratic ethos defined by its commitment to the individual was not total but incremental. The unions retained their link to the Party, their place in the Electoral College for electing the Leader and in the Party Conference. However, this shift was important. It constituted a further gradual step in the individualisation of the Party’s democratic ethos and underpinned further shifts in the logics of democratic reform that emerged in subsequent years.

This chapter starts by giving a broad overview of the key components of reform that took place during this period, the main protagonists involved and the process by which these changes were negotiated and achieved. Narratives pertaining to the political context Labour faced and the way these necessitated organisational reform – and opened up space for a debate about Labour’s identity – are then outlined. Subsequently, the way in which

history remained a key narrative in the performance of change is discussed. Finally, this chapter considers the way in which narratives that encompassed the relationship between democracy, modernity and the individual were drawn on to debate and define Labour's new organisational settlement. Elites drew on these narratives in particular to continue the Party's turn towards the individual.

### **Reforming the Union Link: The Changes**

In the aftermath of the election defeat of 1992, further organisational change became an immediate focus. These changes had their roots in the preceding period of 'modernisation' under Neil Kinnock and, despite his resignation as Leader after Labour's loss, he continued to play a significant role in bringing about these reforms as Chair of the NEC. Changes to policy-making were affirmed soon after defeat in 1992, when the official foundation of the NPF was agreed by Conference. In its final form, the NPF deviated from blueprints that had been drawn up under Kinnock in previous years, most notably by reducing the size of the forum from an originally proposed 150-200 members down to 81. Alongside this, in 1990 the Conference agreed to adjust the union-CLP balance of votes from 90:10 to 70:30. However, these particular reforms had firm roots in the preceding period and were the subject of little to no meaningful debate or contest at this stage. As a result, these particular reforms were primarily considered in the preceding chapter.

Beyond the introduction of the NPF, this period saw a substantial set of reforms take place that altered substantially the involvement of the Party's affiliated unions and party processes in Conference, in candidate selection and in Leader election. These reforms were not secured without substantial disquiet. Alderman and Carter, whilst conceding the simplistic nature of the terms, described the way in which the debate that turned over this package can be broadly split between 'modernisers' and 'traditionalists'.<sup>2</sup> 'Modernisers' were keen to continue and evolve the process of organisational reform that had begun under Kinnock and to achieve substantial reform. Amongst the most ardent in this particular camp were the rising figures of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and there was

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<sup>2</sup> Keith Alderman and Neil Carter, 'The Labour Party and the Trade Unions: Loosening the Ties', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 47:3, 1994, pp. 321-37.

even talk amongst this group of pushing for the complete breaking of the link.<sup>3</sup> On the other side, ‘traditionalists’ both in the unions and on the Party’s left such as John Edmonds of the GMB and Bill Morris of the TGWU, sought to resist any radical calls for the complete transformation or abandonment of the link. These broad positions filtered through debates about the specific components of reform and in wider arguments about the relationship and the Party’s identity.

Whilst Smith and his ‘modernising’ supporters had initially considered seeking changes early at the 1992 Conference, the amount of opposition to change resulted in a longer timeline. The TULRG was established in order to consider in detail the union link and attempt to find a consensus over union involvement at Conference, in candidate selection and in the election of the Party’s Leader and Deputy Leader. It was composed of ‘traditionalists’ from the trade unions, ‘modernisers’, and party figures such as the General Secretary. This group, on which Lewis Minkin himself sat, became the locus of these debates but failed to reach consensus in several key areas.<sup>4</sup> Despite the establishment of this group and the hope of General Secretary Larry Whitty that the process of reform be ‘taken slowly and seriously and not degenerate into a sort of Mods *versus* Rockers confrontation’, debate between ‘traditionalist’ trade unionists and ‘modernising’ reformists often spilled into public.<sup>5</sup>

The substance of change itself was hotly contested and concessions were made on all sides, both in relation to the arrangements for union participation at Conference and in the Electoral College for Leadership selection. Most unions were willing to accept the eradication of the block vote in Labour’s Leadership selection process and the equalization of Electoral College weightings for the unions, CLPs and PLP to one third each. Whilst this was not an insubstantial change, it did not go as far as the introduction of OMOV across the board, as some ‘modernisers’ had suggested. In addition, most ‘traditionalists’ were willing to accept the wish of the ‘modernisers’ to eradicate the practice of unions acting as monolithic blocks at Conference and permit the future reduction of the weighting of the union vote down from 70% to 50% if party membership

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<sup>3</sup> For an effective analysis of the arguments surrounding the viability of a break in the Labour-union link in this period see Paul Webb, ‘Reforming the Labour Party-Trade Union Link: An Assessment’, *British Elections and Parties Yearbook*, 4:1, 1994, pp. 1-14.

<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the most detailed account of this period can be found in Lewis Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: A Study in the Politics of Labour’s Party Management*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014). pp. 94-102.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Anderson, ‘Crisis Manager’, *Tribune*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1993, p. 5.



increased. Instead of the 'unit vote', each union delegate would have an individual vote to cast. However, when it came to candidate selection in CLPs, agreement was difficult to find and five different proposals were put out to consultation, each with varying degrees of union involvement ranging from the reintroduction of the local Electoral College to full OMOV for party members only.<sup>6</sup>

Wickham-Jones notes that, to an even greater degree than in previous periods, there existed a significant amount of divergence between the unions and 'modernisers' over the precise form that organisational change should take. Indeed, even amongst unions opposed to change there was a significant variety of opinion over what could and could not be accepted.<sup>7</sup> This was particularly true in the area of candidate selection. And, despite the tough opposition of trade unionists, Smith was only willing to compromise from pure OMOV and instead push for a 'levy plus' scheme in which trade union members could also have a vote in the selection of a parliamentary candidate if they became affiliated member, declared commitment to the Party and paid a small fee. He was unwilling to abandon his drive for change entirely. For unions like the GMB and the TGWU this was not a compromise far enough. The Conference of 1993 became the forum in which this stand-off was to be resolved.

In the end, a combination of concerted persuasion and management of party process formed the basis of a narrow victory. The package was passed 47.5% to 44.4%.<sup>8</sup> Both a rousing speech by John Prescott and the way in which the rule changes were composed were especially important to the passing of these changes.<sup>9</sup> The package of reforms to the union link was combined with a series of other changes, including those designed to improve the representation of women in the Party. The Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (MSF) delegation then found themselves in an awkward position as they had mandates to both oppose the reform package but support changes to improve the representation of women. Because of this conflicting mandate, they opted to abstain at the last minute. This, combined with the fact that Conference was now balanced 70:30 between the unions and CLPs, contributed significantly to the passing of the rule changes. Furthermore, the procedures of the Party protected the package from the passing of a

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<sup>6</sup> See Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', pp. 49-53.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Wickham-Jones, 'John Smith's Settlement? The Work of the 1992-93 Labour Party – Trade Union Links Review Group', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 47:1, 2016, pp. 21-45.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Minkin, 'The Blair Supremacy', pp. 94-102.

<sup>9</sup> See Keith Alderman and Neil Carter, 'The Labour Party and the Trade Unions', p. 327; Mark Wickham-Jones, 'John Smith's Settlement?', p. 29; Lewis Minkin, 'The Blair Supremacy', p. 101.

contradictory composite tabled by the TGWU in support of the Electoral College mechanism for candidate selection. Because this was a composite, not a rule change, the rule change package that was secured took precedence.

Thus, in this period, significant debate erupted and substantial change was secured in structural terms. But, if these changes and their consequences are to be fully understood, a renewed focus must be placed upon the relationship between these organisational structures and the narratives that constructed arguments about their necessity, historical legitimacy and democratic nature. It was in these narratives that the Party's elites interwove technical debates about structural form and process with more thoroughgoing articulations of Labour's identity as an organisation.

### **A Union Disrupted: Narrating the 1992 General Election Defeat and Socio-Political Change**

Soon after the General Election defeat, party elites began to produce narratives about the relationship between the Labour Party, its affiliated trade unions, the 1992 General Election defeat and wider changes in the socio-political landscape. Central to the explanation of this relationship was the idea that the Labour Party and its union link had, at least for many key actors involved in or supportive of the 'modernising' camp, contributed to Labour's inability to return to office and was now out of step with changes affecting the wider socio-economic terrain in contemporary Britain. The sense that the times in which Labour found itself warranted change was pervasive and often evoked, even by those who were prickly about the precise form change would take. As a result, the impetus for reform and change was strongly established. Consequently, a space was opened up in which Labour's organisational identity, in relation to its trade union roots, could be reshaped.

This sense of a need for reform was already mounting in the weeks following Labour's failure to return to government. A preliminary report into Labour's loss at the 1992 election acknowledged that, despite making some progress in important areas, there could be 'no disguising the fact that the 1992 election result must rank as one of the most

disappointing in the history of the Party.’<sup>10</sup> And, whilst various elements including a hostile media and Labour’s leadership were considered to be important factors in explaining this defeat, attention soon turned to the way in which Labour’s own internal organisational arrangements might have contributed to a public image that lacked the support necessary for Labour to return to office.

This served as a point of departure for the narratives of ‘modernisers’ in particular, who constructed a sense of necessity for reform around the notion that the trade union relationship was unsatisfactory in two respects. Firstly, the union link was presented as having contributed directly to an image of the Labour Party as one that was somehow unfit to govern and under the thumb of union barons. Secondly, and in much broader terms, ‘modernisers’ focused continually on the idea that the changing nature of trade unionism and shifts in the socio-political landscape since 1979 meant that the functioning of the Labour-union link was now temporally desynchronised with the world that the Party was operating in. Labour had not yet gone far enough to respond to these.

In the Leadership and Deputy Leadership campaigns of 1992, the idea that Labour must do something about its relationship with the trade unions was already coming to the fore and became a regular theme of public comment for all candidates involved. Indeed, Bryan Gould, John Smith, Margaret Beckett and John Prescott were all supportive of the undertaking of some kind of reform, even if there was not yet any agreement on what exactly this reform should look like. Setting out his vision for leadership of the Party, John Smith emphasised how unpalatable the current organisational arrangements were within the Party and to the wider public:

I do not believe that it can be acceptable to ourselves or to the public who observe our deliberations that the mass membership of the Party should only wield a tenth of the votes at Party Conference... I welcome the recognition among leaders of the trade union movement that the extent to which the block vote determines decision making at Conference requires reform.<sup>11</sup>

These claims were further bolstered by responses to the precise conduct of the 1992 leadership contest itself, in which several trade unions came out for candidates before even balloting their members. John Edmonds of the GMB, who backed the eradication of the block vote but opposed other measures in the final reform package, said of the

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<sup>10</sup> Larry Whitty, ‘General Election 1992 Preliminary Report: Note from General Secretary’, NEC Minutes, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1992, LHASC, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Smith Pledges New Paths for “Listening Leadership”’, *The Guardian*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1992, p. 6.

leadership contest in 1992 that: 'the sooner we can get to a system in which the constituency parties and MPs select the Leader the better.'<sup>12</sup> Jimmy Airrie of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) acknowledged that the failure of his union to hold a ballot of their members on who they were backing in the leadership contest 'may weaken the potential Labour Leader, if the Conservatives can then argue he has been foisted on the Party by the trade unions.'<sup>13</sup> In this light, the General Secretary of the electrical section of the AEEU, Paul Gallagher, concluded on the wider issue of the block vote and party-union relations, 'we must get this settled once and for all, so that people cannot give the trade unions as part of the reason for not voting Labour.'<sup>14</sup> Labour MP Frank Field, from his position on the right of the Party, wrote in fuller terms how the failure of the TGWU to ballot its members in the leadership contest had:

profound implications for the legitimacy of the election process itself...If Labour is to have a chance of winning again, it needs not only to cease adjusting to Thatcherism as a result of yet another defeat. It must leapfrog the Government's programme and set out its own radical alternatives centred around the rights of the consumer. It must also be seen to be a democratic organisation.<sup>15</sup>

As this early push for reform began to develop, some figures within the trade unions were keen to stress the importance that the link between the affiliated unions and the Labour Party was not broken in its entirety. However, they did not act as a homogenous group seeking to stave off the notion that some changes were required. Indeed, much of the debate that emerged turned on the form of change rather than its content. The Deputy General Secretary of NUPE, Tom Sawyer, came out early in the battle for reform to lay down a strong defence of the union link but noted that:

if we are to succeed in winning the support of non-union, white collar, working-class voters, particularly in the south of England, the unions are going to have to learn to move in the modern world and ensure that their behaviour stops damaging the Party.<sup>16</sup>

By the time the selection process ended, and the sense of inevitability surrounding the election of John Smith as Labour Leader was confirmed by his victory, key figures had already begun considering the wider picture and whether the reform process for the

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<sup>12</sup> Patrick Wintour and Seumas Milne, 'Unions Support End of Block Vote', *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1992, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Timmins, 'Union Hand May Be Forced Over Block Vote', *The Independent*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1992, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Field, 'Labour's Need for Real Democracy', *The Guardian*, 29<sup>th</sup> April 1992, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Sawyer, 'Don't Ditch the Union Link', *Tribune*, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1992, p. 1.

Labour Party had already gone as far as it needed to under Kinnock. Tony Blair, a leading ‘moderniser’ and key figure in the TULRG, explained how:

There is now general agreement that they need to go further. We came only this far because we failed to define Labour's *modern identity* sufficiently. Nobody any more is defending the status quo, in terms of our policy development, image or organisation - and that's something the media has missed.[Emphasis added]<sup>17</sup>

Here, Blair explicitly recognises the linkage between organisational renewal and the invention of a ‘modern’ identity for the Party. As a whole, this language demonstrates how, even in very early aftermath of the 1992 General Election, the sense of some form of disruption to Labour’s journey back to government and to its existing organisational settlement was becoming commonplace. It also exemplifies, in narrative form, why this his particular push for change might be reasonably described as John Smith ‘transacting an item of unfinished business’ as Eric Shaw has suggested.<sup>18</sup> The logics of this were very much a continuation of those already present in the narratives of ‘modernisation’ that had been developed by Kinnock and his supporters between 1987 and 1992.

This sense of disruption to the status quo of Labour-union relations solidified further as the reform process continued, and as actors on all sides sought to engage with debates over the form reform should take, rather than whether it should take place at all. This does not mean that the sense of disruption that was growing in the narratives of ‘modernising’ Labour elites went completely without challenge. At the Labour Party Conference in 1992, ‘traditionalists’ seeking to stem the tide of reform managed to secure the passing of a motion that backed the continuation of trade union involvement through voting at all levels of the Party. Bill Morris of the TGWU moved this composite on the basis that:

all the analysis shows the trade union links was not an issue at the last General Election, in fact we were not even there...the average voter, waking in the middle of the night in Sheffield or Swindon or anywhere else, is not worrying about the block vote.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this, he also declared that he was willing to accept the establishment of a review to explore party-union relations and the potential for an increased involvement for trade unionists within Labour’s structures. Thus, this challenge was only partial. Whilst the notion of electoral pressure was rejected, there was a sense that some kind of

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<sup>17</sup> Patrick Wintour, ‘Mr Smith: Labour’s New Moraliser’, *The Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1992, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979: Crisis and Transformation*. (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> *Report of the Ninety-First Annual Conference of the Labour Party*. (London, Labour Party, 1992), p. 189.

improvement was sought by union members themselves. It also spurred 'modernisers' to continue their drive to entrench the idea that Labour must achieve fundamental reform in order to be prepared for the new political terrain it faced. In the wake of Bill Morris' speech and the passing of the motion, Bill Jordan of the AEEU responded by emphasising that, 'unless reform comes in, we won't see the formation of another Labour government.'<sup>20</sup> Such exchanges exemplify the kind of divisions that were important to the move for undertake a review, rather than to push for change to take place rapidly at the Conference of 1992. In the aftermath of this Conference, attention turned to this review and its work in negotiating some kind of settlement.

As the review group set to work and began focussing on the shape that reform might take, narratives about the impact the link had on Labour's political standing were extended further, particularly in the documents it produced for wider circulation. The interim report of the TULRG published in March of 1993, put together by actors from both 'traditionalist' and 'modernising' camps, described how 'the economic and social environment in which we operate today looks very different to that prior to 1979.' Subsequently, it argued that various changes to the political conditions in British politics and the nature of trade unionism meant that 'it is entirely appropriate that the Party should re-evaluate its key relationships and consider how well they are adapted to take us forward.'<sup>21</sup>

The attention of Labour's trade unionists and leading politicians turned from whether to reform to what reforms could and should be made. Tony Blair spoke of how 'the reason Labour lost in 1992, as for the previous four elections, is not complex. It is simple: society changed and we did not change sufficiently with it.'<sup>22</sup> It was in this spirit that John Smith, presenting the reforms himself to Conference in 1993 as part of his strategy to return to government, argued that:

As Leader of our party, charged with the responsibility to secure that victory, I say to this Conference that the changes I propose today are vital - absolutely central to our strategy for winning power, and I ask you to unite behind them.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Timmins and Patricia Wynn Davies, 'Smith Rebuffed Over One Member, One Vote', *The Independent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1992, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Labour Party/Trade Union Links: Interim Report of the Review Group and Questionnaire*. Labour party, 1993, pp. 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Bell, 'Back or Sack Me, Smith May Tell Unions', *The Daily Mail*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1993, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1993', p. 134.

In the space between Labour's General Election defeat in 1992 and the final confirmation of reforms to the block vote, leadership election and candidate selection procedures at the Conference of 1993, the sense of the need for some kind of change was a constant. Those critical of the reform process often did little to challenge the picture being painted of Labour's political circumstances or the world in which it existed. Indeed, those opposed to reform ultimately focused more on challenging the substance of reform rather than its necessity. The establishment of a broad sense of a need for change – one broad enough to bring about an intense consideration of Labour's organisational arrangements and stimulate internal debate – formed the first stage of the process when it comes to consideration of Labour's *identity*. From this sense of disruption stemmed a whole series of familiar questions surrounding the relationship between structural change and party identity. How, or indeed could, change be an authentic part of Labour's identity as a party founded by unions? And, within this context, what was the most legitimate form change could take?

### **Historicising Union Link Change: Narratives of Renewal and Rupture**

As the 'modernisers' continued in their drive for reform, and debates over the form of change ensued, a series of more substantial arguments then erupted about the ability of Labour's identity to weather any radical reform to the union link. In this way, the question of reform to the union link, like other debates about organisational change, was not just a technical one but one of a more intrinsic and fundamental nature about the very essence of the Party. How far could change go without uprooting the central characteristics of Labour as a progressive party founded by the unions? This was a contentious question, and arguments surrounding this issue frequently took place via conceptions of 'the past', as elites focussed on bringing history to bear in deliberations about the relationship between the unions and the Party. Drucker's observation that Labour's 'sense of its past is so central to its ethos that it plays a crucial role in defining what the Party is about to those in it' continued to have clear organisational relevance.<sup>24</sup> As such, this period demonstrates the continued importance of history to the very performance of Labour's organisational transformations.

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<sup>24</sup> Henry M. Drucker, *Doctrine and Ethos in the Labour Party*. (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979). p. 25.

For ‘traditionalists’, the union past was a spectre with which to haunt those so intent on drastically changing the Labour-union relationship: a way of fending off change and characterising undesirable reforms as well beyond any reasonable understanding of Labour’s traditions. For the ‘modernisers’, resort to narratives of history was an attempt to respond to these concerns and quell any attempt to portray change as a complete break of the union link. Indeed, paying dues to ‘historic union links’ formed an important part of securing change, bridging the gap between understandings of Labour’s identity as it stood and the changes being proposed. In conjunction with this, ‘modernisers’ continued to insist that, as an adaptive party, Labour should seek to bring itself ‘up to date’. They continued to walk a difficult line between advocating for the centrality of the unions to Labour’s identity, whilst pushing for substantial changes to Labour’s democratic culture and the way the union link was to be conceived of.

As a leadership candidate, John Smith had spoken early of the need for reform, but the need for this reform to acknowledge the importance and meaning of the union link. At a debate amongst the leadership candidates hosted by the Fabian Society, he argued that:

Strengthening the Labour Party’s democracy does not mean weakening our relationship with the trade union movement. Our values and principles are shared with the trade unions, as is our history. In modernising our systems of election and in reforming the block vote I believe we can build a new partnership with the trade union movement that will be stronger because it encourages the participation of individual union members and healthier because it is fairer between Party and unions.<sup>25</sup>

In a similar tone, he made clear in the run up to his expected victory in the leadership contest that ‘the block vote is out of date and we have got to find other ways of arriving at our decisions.’<sup>26</sup> Alongside this, he insisted that ‘Labour must not, and will not, sever its links with the trade union movement.’<sup>27</sup> The unions, he emphasised, were a crucial part of the Labour Party and this should continue. However, he argued that acknowledging this historical importance did not have to mean stagnation in the face of political challenges. On his election as Leader, he described how ‘the Party of change must be ready to change itself, to be the best and most effective vehicle for realising our values.’<sup>28</sup> Within this characterisation, the affiliated unions, subsumed within the wider

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<sup>25</sup> ‘John Smith, Bryan Gould, Margaret Beckett, John Prescott, *Labour’s Choice: the Fabian Debates*. (London, Fabian Society, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Travis, ‘Smith Calls for End to Union Block Vote’, *The Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1992, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Smith Pledges New Paths for “Listening Leadership”’.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Leadership Election Speech’, 18<sup>th</sup> July 1992, Dianne Hayter Papers, Box 10, LHASC, p. 3.



change-making essence of the Labour Party, could be themselves part of an authentically Labour mission to transform even the relationship these unions have with the Party.

This kind of logic, and this reaching into the past, was typical of the way that ‘modernisers’ sought to bridge the relationship between the ‘modern’ and the historical identity of the Party in this particular phase of party reform and build upon the logics of Kinnock’s earlier ‘modernisation’. Here, Smith gave the very notion of ‘modernisation’ historical roots and limits as he sought to tread a difficult line between continuity and change. Whilst reform was necessary, and required by the political conditions, the centrality of the Labour-union relationship should not be forgotten, nor should this relationship be disfigured beyond all recognition. This kind of reasoning had a much longer history in arguments about Labour’s mission, and the importance of ideological renewal to its political identity. It was in this spirit that Crosland once described how ‘nothing is more traditional in the history of socialist thought than the violent rejection of past doctrines.’<sup>29</sup>

However, despite John Smith’s attempt to strike a balanced tone in his language early on, trade unionists on all sides of the debate felt compelled to draw on history in order to fight off any possibility that reform could lead to the severing of the Labour-union links in their entirety. Whilst ‘modernisers’ publicly spoke of the importance of the union link, Minkin has described in detail how various briefings were given to newspapers that suggested there would be a push for a more radical divorce and that the most ardent modernisers were willing to express such sentiments in private.<sup>30</sup> This no doubt fed into the intensity with which trade unionists sought to defend their position, particularly before formal discussions through the TULRG had begun later in 1992.

For ‘traditionalists’, the evocation of union roots was an attempt to reassert history over present circumstances and shape the process of change by establishing an authority and legitimacy for unions on some sense of a ‘historic’ relationship. Bill Morris of TGWU, active his voicing concerns about the acceptability of any attempt to substantially decrease or remove the influence of union voices in policy-making:

The block vote is up for reform. It is moving from 90 to 70 per cent and that process will continue, but there has to be some mechanism for the unions to have some

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<sup>29</sup> C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*. (London, Cape, 1956). p. 97.

<sup>30</sup> ‘The Blair Supremacy’, pp. 85-6.

influence over policy-making...No one has come up with a formula for taking us to one man one vote and at the same time retaining influence by unions.<sup>31</sup>

Behind these arguments sat historical narratives about the very right of trade unions to involve themselves in Labour's internal structures. He went on to tell Labour Conference delegates in 1992, during the debate over the union link, that:

A Labour party without its trade union links would be a party without its roots, a party without a cause, a party without a soul. We stand for change. But that change must build on our strengths, not demolish our foundations.<sup>32</sup>

At a time when there was real concern amongst 'traditionalists' that the 'modernising' camp would seek severing the union links entirely, Bill Morris was reaching into a historically rooted characterisation of the very meaning of the Labour Party as an organisation in order to mount a defence of union involvement in party structures. Whilst this 'modernising' notion of the Labour Party as a force for change could be accepted, any value of such change-making would, he argued, be lost without the valuable input of the trade union movement. Other key figures from the Labour left, in anticipation of a push by 'modernisers' for a fundamental break in the link between Labour and its affiliated unions, sought to challenge the idea that such a problem existed or that 'modernisation' was a value-neutral solution. Ken Livingstone argued that 'the term modernisation has already become a code word for ending the union link. The British economy will not recover without union support. Labour needs the unions.' Furthermore, he suggested that moves being undertaken to reform the union link, in combination with the new NPF, would merely 'neuter the Party Conference and turn it into a cross between a Nuremburg rally and an encounter group in which we all hold hands.'<sup>33</sup> Clearly, Ken Livingstone was not willing to accept the idea that the proposals to reshape the Labour-union relationship be in any sense a part of a genuinely 'Labour' identity or tradition. Such a response was almost Crossmanite in its conception of Labour's organisation, with a clear stress on Labour as a force for change in society, rather than as a party itself destined to change in order to adapt to arising social conditions.

In the summer of 1993, when the GMB was part of a core block of unions pushing hard against the efforts of 'modernisers' to secure OMOV in the selection of parliamentary candidates, John Edmonds sought to exert the rightful claim of affiliated unions to a stake

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<sup>31</sup> Patricia Wynn Davies, 'Gould Argues for Modernisation of Link with Unions', *The Independent*, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1992, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1992', p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Hidden Agendas on Way to Modernise Labour', *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> April 1992, p. 2.

in the Party. He challenged not only the idea that now was a suitable time for reform but that any reform could be considered as part of any real or genuine continuity within, and respect for, the sanctity of Labour's relationship with its founding unions:

There are three million unemployed, homelessness and poverty on a scale not known for a generation and the health service is falling apart at the seams. And this is the moment when, instead of attacking this awful government, a number of Labour politicians have decided to attack us the trade unions who founded the Party and have loyally supported Labour through thick and thin. We support the Party. We pay for the Party. We have a right to democracy in the Party because, never forget, it is our party, too.<sup>34</sup>

In the face of such opposition, some efforts were made to find a consensus over changes to the Labour-union link, particularly the most fractious issue of union involvement in candidate selection. The interim report and consultation of the TULRG, whilst charting the way in which the political climate facing Labour necessitated a review of party structures and sought views from members on what reforms would be best, it also emphasised an ongoing commitment to the historical value of the trade union movement to the Labour Party by explaining that:

The Labour Party's links with the unions date from its origins. The Labour Representation Committee was founded in 1900 after a decision of the Trades Union Congress which brought together trade unions and socialist societies...That should be a cause for celebration rather than concern.<sup>35</sup>

Despite such characterisations of the union links, the push for 'modernisation' necessitated the continuation of narratives that drew on the past in order to underscore the suitability of the expansion of OMOV in candidate selection, the removal of the block vote and the reforming of the Electoral College. John Smith told the Conference of the TGWU in 1993 that 'there is no question of breaking the historic links between us, links of which I am very proud...But we should not be afraid of modernising our relationship. We surely know we cannot afford to stand still.'<sup>36</sup> He urged Conference to accept the reforms on the basis that:

I want to lead a Labour government that will introduce the most radical package of constitutional reform ever proposed by any major political party. This, I believe, will be a key battleground of the 1990s, as we seek to define the new politics of a new century. And if we are to win that battle – as we must – then I believe we must have the courage and confidence to reform our own constitution as well.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 'Smith Set for Summer War with Unions', *The Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1993, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> 'Labour Party/Trade Union Link Interim Report', p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> 'Reformer Smith Woos the Unions with Compromise', *The Daily Mail*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1993. p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1993', p. 100.

This construction of Labour's relationship with the unions as historically important, but important as part of a party supposedly founded upon a recognition of the need for adaptation and change, continued to be the hallmark of 'modernisers' until the last. At the 1993 Conference, Bill Jordan of the AEEU went so far as to accuse those in the union movement rallying against Smith's final package of obfuscating by relying on the past and hiding 'behind history'.<sup>38</sup> For 'modernisers', history was better understood as a motor for change than as a conservative force.

Somewhat ironically, the most direct, obvious and important challenge to this temporal division between 'traditionalists' and 'modernisers', upon which many of Smith and his supporters relied, was put forward by John Prescott in his eleventh-hour speech to Conference in which he implored opponents of change to 'give us a bit of trust' and support the measures.<sup>39</sup> Prescott used his time at the platform to reject directly the division that had been carved between 'old' and 'new', telling delegates that it was a 'much more complicated' issue. Instead, he insisted that, 'at the heart of this debate is the soul of our movement. It is about maintaining the unity required to secure power.'<sup>40</sup> Minkin, Wickham-Jones and others have noted that the impact of this speech was considerable in securing votes for what was a hotly contested set of changes.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, narratives during this period continue to demonstrate the importance of histories, in their variety of forms, to wider debates over the relationship between organisational reform, and party identity. In this particular instance, they formed a central part of internal debates about the Labour-union relationship as the Party considered undergoing further changes to its internal structures and relationships. These debates were not superficial, but about the very purpose and foundation of the Party, its mythologised substance as a political organisation and political force. In this respect, an important part of Labour's ethos endured. Whilst elite interpretations of the meaning of history showed plurality rather than homogeneity, the tendency for figures to use it in order to underscore specific conceptions of Labour's identity remained.

If Labour's historical consciousness was a point of overall continuity in this particular episode, then it was within the democratic culture of the Party that the most substantial

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<sup>38</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1993', p. 134.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>41</sup> See Keith Alderman and Neil Carter, 'The Labour Party and the Trade Unions', p. 327; Mark Wickham-Jones, 'John Smith's Settlement?', p. 29; Lewis Minkin, 'The Blair Supremacy', p. 101.

shifts took place. ‘Modernisers’ managed to secure victory, albeit a narrow one, on a conception of Labour Party history that could contain within it a commitment to change the Labour-union relationship, if not the entire abandonment of it. Such a conception was important to the continuation of the narratives of ‘modernisers’ in the Kinnock years that, by responding to the circumstances and challenges that had been articulated, Labour was not losing its soul but living out an important part of its historical mission. It was within the confines of such an understanding that the most fundamental parts of the Labour-union relationship, the living and breathing democratic ethos, could be substantially rethought.

### **A Union of Individuals**

The resolution to the apparent temporal disconnect emphasised by Labour’s ‘modernisers’, between Labour’s well-intentioned but now outdated union-centric organisational form and the shifting world of British trade unionism and British politics in the 1990s, was to be found in the further reimagining of the relationship between the Labour Party’s structures and the idea of democracy itself. And, it was through notions of a ‘modern’ democracy that they sought to reshape the identity of the Party and its relationship with the unions. To a greater extent than was the case in the ‘modernising’ years of Neil Kinnock, as discussed in Chapter 5, this transformation took aim at the very nature and legitimacy of the trade union link and the collectivist ideas that underpinned it. As a result, this particular period marked a substantial shift in the language of democracy amongst the Party’s dominant elites. The consequence was a party further redefined by its commitment to individualistic forms of democratic practice.

Summarising Labour’s position in 1994, Eric Shaw reflected that ‘the predicament for Labour is how to respond to cultural patterns which fit uneasily with traditional collectivist ideals – whether to adapt or resist.’<sup>42</sup> Under the leadership of Smith, as in other periods, this response was more about patterns of language than more abstract or independent patterns of material structural change. In shifting the Party’s identity, ‘modernisers’ used narrative patterns which identified and constructed a need for change,

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<sup>42</sup> Eric Shaw, ‘The Labour Party Since 1979’, p. 224.

a cultural basis within Labour for such change and a conception of democracy that could resolve the problems presented.

Thus, narratives during this period became increasingly dominated by the idea that trade unions should be understood as organisations of individuals. Subsequently, an individualised party democracy was positioned as the single most just and legitimate response to Labour's situation in electoral and presentational terms, and to the socio-political times. Elements of distinct representation for unions remained within the acceptance of the Electoral College and arrangements at Conference but on the basis of individual votes rather than a block vote for union members and delegates respectively. Such an argument was central to the resolution put forward by the Party's most vocal proponents of OMOV and was intrinsically bound to evolving conceptions of political 'modernity'. In this denouement, a democracy characterised by individual action was the normatively just and practicable solution to Labour's electoral difficulties and its 'out-of-date' union linkage. This argument also found recognition amongst supportive trade unionists and even acknowledgement amongst trade unionists who were largely opposed to the removal of the Electoral College for candidate selection at constituency level but who supported other elements of the package and the eradication of the block vote. By the Conference of 1993, these individualising narratives were symbolically affirmed by the victory of the reform package itself.

Consequently, the narrative that 'modernising' elites presented during this particular episode meant that organisational change did not just affect the procedural form of the union link but reimagined its meaning and legitimacy and, ultimately, the Party's articulated democratic character. Despite attempts by some 'traditionalists' to challenge such narratives by claiming collectivist political practices had legitimacy and were democratic in and of themselves, Labour emerged from this period with a transformed identity when it came to the stories crucial and influential elites were telling about the Party. In this identity, the individual and individual choice continued to hold substantial currency as they had begun to do in the previous episode of organisational reform under Kinnock's leadership.

From the outset, the 'modernisers' placed an increasing focus upon the individual in their conceptions of trade unions as political bodies when describing the ways in which the Labour could seek to meet organisationally the electoral challenges it faced and the disruption they argued now faced Labour's union link arrangements. On his election as

Leader of the Labour Party, John Smith described how ‘in modernising our democracy we will strengthen not weaken our direct links with millions of individual trade unionists.’<sup>43</sup> In this, he signalled what was to be an increased emphasis on the recognition of the individuals making up trade unions and a seeming need to recast democracy in acknowledgement of such a conception. This was a further reflection of the impact that Thatcherism had had when it came to the politics of industrial relations and trade unionism in preceding years, as discussed in the previous chapter.

If trade unions were to be understood primarily as body of individuals, then only a definition of democracy that corresponded to such an individualistic focus could be relied upon to satisfactorily resolve the disconnect between Labour’s form and circumstances. This meant an individualised and more direct link, pure and untainted by anachronistic understandings of collectivism as democratic when it comes to union involvement in party affairs. Such a form would be replaced by an individual focus that took Labour’s form as a party from the ‘old’ to the ‘modern’.

As the process of debate and reform evolved, so too did this emphasis on the relationship between trade unionism, the individual and democracy. Paul Gallagher of the AEEU spoke in support of a composite advocating the spread of OMOV at the 1992 Conference and its ability to resolve Labour’s issues of electability and its out-of-step political practices:

One member one vote corrects that situation at a stroke. It shows that we trust the membership to elect their own Leader and candidates. It is about making sure that only individual party members of the Party influence that selection, not Tories, Liberal Democrats or anybody else...It is right in itself. It is good for the Party and it is a clear signal that the trade unions see the Labour Party as a partner and not our puppet.<sup>44</sup>

And, in the AEEU’s political bulletin, John Spellar saw fit to reprint and circulate in its entirety the speech former EPTU General Secretary Frank Chapple delivered to Labour’s 1981 Wembley Conference in support of the OMOV principle. In this speech, Chapple had gone against the grain and advocated for OMOV on the basis that ‘it stops the Party being taken over by unrepresentative cliques. It reaffirms our traditional belief in democracy and will help to unify rather than divide the Party.’<sup>45</sup> While this had been an unusual argument in 1981, in the aftermath of Labour’s 1992 defeat, ‘modernisers’

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Leadership Election Victory Speech’, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Labour Party Conference 1992’, pp. 190-1.

<sup>45</sup> John Spellar, ‘AEEU Political Bulletin’, September 1992, p. 1.

were increasingly relying on the idea that an individually-focused form of democracy would provide a solution to Labour's electoral and political problems.

Those driving the process of reform and pushing for the spread of OMOV most forcefully continued to build on this logic. Blair, from his key position on the TULRG, doubled down on this reasoning in the run up to Conference of 1993, placing OMOV both firmly within the honourable roots of trade unionism and as a 'modernising' democratic principle able to redefine Labour's organisation for the 'modern' age:

What I believe is that we should make the democracy of our party as real as possible. The idea that I'm trying to distance Labour from the trade unions is just extraordinary. To most people outside, the idea that we should select our candidates on the basis of an individual franchise of members doesn't seem a very revolutionary proposition. This has nothing to do with any idea that the trade union are associated with the Party or that they're part of an 'image problem'. What it's actually about is getting a modern democracy for the Labour Party. To me it is simply commonsense that that democracy should be based on One Member One Vote.<sup>46</sup>

He echoed this further in a piece for *The Guardian* in which he argued that OMOV 'is simple. It is clear. It is fair and it is right...far from it being a betrayal of the history or traditions either of the Labour Party or the trade unions, it is a fulfilment of them, but for the modern age.'<sup>47</sup> Even when it came to a collectively understood endeavour like trade unionism, such an individualised understanding of democratic practices could apparently simultaneously remedy Labour's present circumstances and acknowledge the importance of the affiliated unions to its politics. In similar terms, Neil Kinnock described how:

People want to know that the political parties for which they vote are democratically run, democratically led and that they take their decisions in a democratic fashion. One Member One Vote is the best basis on which to demonstrate that.<sup>48</sup>

In 1993, Maggie Jones of NUPE implored Conference to support the proposals in full, arguing that they fulfilled all that trade union members wanted:

a Labour Party committed to the trade union link. They have got it. They want a party that treats them seriously *as individuals*. They have got it. They want a party that gives them full opportunity to participate at all levels. They have got it. [Emphasis added]<sup>49</sup>

This sense that Labour's present circumstances, and its trade union roots, could both be recognised by placing an increasing emphasis on the individual was then a pervasive part

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<sup>46</sup> Tony Blair, 'Tony Blair Boy Wonder', *Tribune*, 29<sup>th</sup> January 1993, p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Blair, 'Unblocking Labour', *The Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1993, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> 'Labour Plans Reduction in Union Voting Power', LBC/IRN Radio Archive, First Transmitted 24<sup>th</sup> February 1993. Available at: <http://bufvc.ac.uk/tvandrado/lbc/index.php/segment/0001300308007> (Accessed 28th February 2017).

<sup>49</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1993', p. 136.



of the new identity and new meaning of democracy ‘modernisers’ were seeking to craft and project through their articulation of change. Indeed, they bound such a conception of democracy to the very language of the ‘modern’. By acknowledging the importance of individual trade unionists and spreading a conception of democracy that could best facilitate these individuals and their just right to exercise choice, ‘modernisers’ substantially reshaped understandings of trade unions that permitted them to legitimately exist as collective blocks.

Of course, the continued rise of this emphasis on the centrality of the individual in labour movement politics, individualised ‘democracy’ and on the expansion of OMOV in the narratives of ‘modernisers’ was not without its critics. In this sense, the plurality of narratives surrounding the nature of ‘democracy’ and the legitimacy of Labour’s structures continued. Major union figures who were opposed to change, either particular elements or in its entirety, sought to critique the idea that any real resolution to Labour’s political circumstances could be based purely on this individual engagement. For these ‘traditionalists’, preserving the sanctity of distinct union engagement – to at least some degree – was paramount.

John Edmonds of the GMB, who had in previous years been supportive of the ‘modernisation’ process, argued against acceptance of the proposed changes to the union link and, in particular, those which changed the involvement of unions in the selection of parliamentary candidates. However, with his previous support for OMOV and ‘modernisation’, he was also clear to acknowledge the legitimacy of an increased involvement of individuals. In 1992 in the course of Labour’s leadership election to find a successor to Kinnoch, he told BBC radio that future trade union involvement in Labour Party affairs should be achieved ‘...not voting by holding up big cards, but voting by holding up their hands or by casting individual votes. That’s a more democratic system.’ And, the trade unions and institutions ought to ‘step back a bit, and individual trade union members should play a bigger part.’<sup>50</sup>

Later in 1993, when mounting substantial public opposition to the removal of a distinct trade union voice in the selection of parliamentary candidates, Edmonds was still willing to concede that in other areas of party organisation the ‘democratisation’ of the Party was

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<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Timmins and Martin Whitfield, ‘Union Leader Urges End to Block Votes’, *The Independent*, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1992, p. 8.

to be best achieved by finding ways in which individual trade unionists could involve themselves in party process:

We are happy to tear up our block vote card but we will not tell our levy paying members who took part in the leadership ballot last year, and who vote in the selection of Parliamentary candidates, that they must surrender their democratic rights.<sup>51</sup>

Acceptance of this notion that democracy is at its purest and most legitimate when based upon the direct involvement of individuals was partly reinforced even by some unions who voted against the package at the Conference in 1993. Even where parliamentary selection was concerned, this was largely about debating the way in which members as *individuals* should be able to retain their voices as unionists and distinct from party members by resisting the idea that trade unionists ought to become party members in some way in order to be recognised in these processes.

Others sought to confront the challenge to collectivist expressions of democracy in more substantial terms. Bill Morris of the TGWU was dogged in his opposition to party reform that, in his view, delegitimised collectivist understandings of trade unionism, its associated political practices and the legitimacy of the distinct role of unions in party affairs. Consequently, he sought to directly challenge the solution that ‘modernisers’ had posited in their narrative claims about moving further towards OMOV, away from the block vote and away from arrangements that allowed trade unions distinct voices through Electoral College arrangements. Indeed, amongst trade unionists, his interventions most directly challenged the notion that an individualised understanding of trade unionism and democracy could be considered an acceptable solution to Labour’s woes. In the run up to the Conference of 1993, he wrote how:

Some object to the trade union influence in the Party being exercised collectively. However, a democratically-based collectivism is the foundation of trade unionism and, indeed, the foundation of Labour’s approach to society itself. At work, as in politics, this enhances the power of the individual to get a hearing and make a contribution. Trade unionism is based on the recognition that there is little the individual can do to improve things in society on his or her own.<sup>52</sup>

In this, Bill Morris mounted substantial opposition to the idea that a focus on individual party members was more democratic or legitimate, or that it was consistent with Labour’s union roots and traditions. He acknowledged his union’s previous support for the expansion of OMOV and the reduction of the union block vote at Conference in previous

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<sup>51</sup> John Edmonds, ‘The Cross John Smith Has to Bear’, *The Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1993, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Bill Morris, ‘Ties that Bind a Party to its Roots’, *The Independent*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1993, p. 20.

years in *Tribune*, but stated firmly that ‘anyone who in the Labour Party has a problem with the idea of a democratically expressed collectivism has clearly strayed into the wrong party.’<sup>53</sup> Here, the leader of the TGWU made clear that, in his view, the package of reforms being proposed was a package that ignored the fact that the arrangements that already existed had worthy claims to legitimacy. Other delegates at Conference went on to make similar claims, with one CLP delegate from Birmingham Selly Oak insisting to her comrades that ‘The Labour party is a collectivist movement, not an individualistic pressure group.’<sup>54</sup> Thus, for some ‘traditionalists’, the ‘modernising’ narrative that reiterated an individualistic understanding of trade unionism and the parallel individualisation of the involvement of unionists – and an emphasis above all on the accommodation of individual party *members* – was a disfiguring of the spirit of Labour’s politics.

The result itself was undoubtedly tight and the endorsement of Smith’s claim about the capacity of the reforms to achieve this was closely won. However, it was not just the reforms themselves that gained some affirmation at Conference, but the consistent arguments that ‘modernisers’ had been making about the relationship between the political landscape, the fitness of Labour to respond to this landscape and contemporary times, and the manifestations of normative conceptions of ‘democracy’ in Labour’s organisational structure. Elite narratives that justified and advocated for change, or even accepted change in specific respects, underscored the importance of individualism and choice as ‘democratic’ elements that Labour could no longer downplay. And, whilst this turn towards the individual had begun under Neil Kinnock’s leadership in the preceding years, this period marked a particularly important one when it came to the reshaping of the meaning of Labour’s union link and the legitimate forms of trade union participation. Given that Labour has its political roots in these organisations, shifting understandings around this issue was, perhaps unsurprisingly, as much about identity as it was about structure and process.

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<sup>53</sup> Bill Morris, ‘No Lessons Needed From the Modernisers’, *Tribune*, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1993, p. 8

<sup>54</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1993’, p. 139.

## Conclusion

This period of organisational change had important structural consequences, as John Smith and his allies secured the substantial transformation of the processes through which the trade unions related to the Party. The block vote, which had been an enduring component of trade union democracy within the bounds of the Labour Party itself, was now gone at Conference and in the mechanism for selecting the Labour Leader and Deputy Leader. The Electoral College for the selection of parliamentary candidates was also not to return, and instead a system in which unionists could engage as individuals was its replacement. The weight of votes in the Electoral College for leadership elections was equalised between the unions, CLPs and MPs. Certainly, each of these components were important structurally and the reforms were a way of reshaping the power balances within the Party as other authors have acknowledged.

However, these changes were also part of a more complex relationship between narratives, organisational structures and questions of identity and culture. This could only be fully explored through an explicit focus on the stories that actors told in debating these organisational reforms. The narratives elites constructed drew connections between Labour's circumstances, debates about Labour's historical roots and the extent to which these could be stretched, and the culture of democracy that should be fostered in response to the political landscape. And, whilst these changes may well have had an impact on power, the narratives through which they were articulated demonstrate an important shift in visions of Labour's identity amongst its elites. The primary source of this shift came from those in the 'modernising' camp, who were ascendant within the Party's leadership and reliant upon temporal claims about Labour's relationship with history and its present circumstances, as well as figures from key unions. However, even beyond this 'modernising' camp, concessions over the block vote betrayed a gradual loosening of the attitudes to the individualisation of the methods of union representation within the Party amongst those who had often been keen to advocate the value of their collective voice.

This shift was not a rupture or a complete overhaul of Labour's democratic culture. But it did mark a further evolution in the temporal politics of 'modernisation'. During this period of reform, collectivist voices were present but eschewed further in the name of catching Labour up with 'modern' British politics and the country's socio-political landscape. There was a gradual creep, even amongst trade unionists, in the weight placed on the importance of the individual in the Party's political practices and in its embedded

understandings of the legitimacy of trade unionism. This gradual creep took place in the narrative dynamic of party reform in which party elites drew on history and ideas of democracy in order to solve the disruptive pressures of Labour's narrated political circumstances.

Here then, the individualising logics that had been established during the leadership of Neil Kinnock and had become a defining feature of the way that modernisers sought to reimagine the Party were developed and extended. This had important consequences for Labour's identity in several respects. A party that had placed such an emphasis on its union roots, and on its unique relationship with a wider labour movement, abandoned further the collectivist principles that underpinned these roots in search of new arrangements that it could more suitably describe as being part of a political party in the modern world. Thus, in an organisational sense, Labour's identity was undergoing an important shift in its democratic ethos.

Beyond the consequences within this particular moment of Labour's history, the 'modernising' logic of individualisation and its legitimacy in the language and ideas underpinning organisational change had a longer pertinence. The sense that a turn towards the individual was the best way to meet the organisational problems that arose from Labour's political circumstances endured beyond the 1990s and into the next millennium. It was in these ideas, and in these familiar narrative themes, that both Ed Miliband oversaw his own attempts to reimagine the essence of the Labour Party as a political body. However, in the intervening period, and as Labour assumed office, attentions turned to Labour's political culture in a more substantive and less process-oriented sense, as the 'modernisers' and New Labour's architects sought to build new understandings of the Party's history and reinforce its identity as a parliamentary party. They did this in the hope this would make governing a smoother ride.

### **7. Labour's Cultural Turn: Partnership in Power 1994-97**

May 1994 saw the sudden and unexpected death of the Labour Leader John Smith. In July, the Party elected Tony Blair as his replacement. With 57% of the Electoral College vote going to Blair, this was an important affirmation of the 'modernising' programme that had been pursued in years past. With this confirmation, Blair and his supporters continued with party renewal in both programmatic and organisational terms, as they sought to lead Labour to victory and prepare it for a return to office. Meanwhile, figures from the Labour's once ascendant 'hard' left continued to find themselves without major influence when it came to change in party platform or organisation.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the continuities and discontinuities between New Labour and 'old' Labour have been subject to significant scholarly debate, Blair's premiership is generally marked out as one in which substantial change took place in policy and organisation. After his election as Leader, Blair pressed forward with his vision for Labour's 'modernisation'.<sup>2</sup> What followed were numerous changes to the Party's programme and a series of constitutional changes. Clause IV of Labour's constitution was redesigned and replaced. The central effect of this was the revoking of the Party's wholesale commitment to nationalisation. In addition, large parts of the Party's platform were reworked with a view to combining an embrace of markets and capitalist political economy with an emphasis on social justice.

Both this shift in the Party's constitution, and the manifesto itself, were given legitimacy through internal plebiscites. Beyond this though, Blair sought to evolve and extend the thrust of organisational change that had taken place in the previous years by focussing on issues of party governance and policy-making. This focus was without the commitment to further expanding OMOV balloting as in previous years.

Instead, responsibility was given to the General Secretary Tom Sawyer to prepare the Party's organisation for the potential stresses and strains of government. These preparations began in 1995 and formed a package that came to be called 'Partnership in

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<sup>1</sup> See Timothy Heppell, *Choosing the Labour Leader: Labour Party Leadership Elections from Wilson to Brown*, (London, Taurus Academic Studies, 2010). pp. 173-90.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Heffernan, *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party: Continuity and Change in the Making of New Labour*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Stephen Driver and Luke Martell, *New Labour*. Revised Edition. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2006); Eric Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007*. (Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2008).

Power'. This package altered the way that policy was made, the functioning of Conference and the composition of the NEC.

Whilst this package was being deliberated and agreed, party elites shaped their narratives around memories of Labour's last experiences in government. In one respect, this was done with significant continuity with the 'modernising' narrative of years past, in which Labour was to jettison its clunky and dysfunctional pasts and bring itself up to date. However, there was an important evolution when it came to the temporal and cultural politics of organisational reform during this period. This shift was rooted in an elite turn towards Labour's *culture* as a key target of organisational change.

Party elites argued that Labour's culture was a barrier to the achievement of political goals and maintaining Labour's position in office. The Partnership in Power package was pitched as the vehicle for resolving this. Through these new structures, and the way they were spoken about, the Party's culture of confrontation was, they hoped, to be replaced with one of respectful co-operation and partnership. In this vein, Blair and his supporters claimed that the Party needed to reinvent its cultural traditions by stopping its commemoration of conflict and disunity and replacing this with other more positive histories. This became a part of what it meant to make the Party 'modern'. Despite this, these notions of partnership and responsibility sat awkwardly alongside an increasing emphasis on the predominance of the Labour Leader and his government in this relationship, as the 'modernisers' sought to simultaneously assert the importance of parliamentary democracy to the Party's political identity.

This chapter first gives a brief overview of the changes and debates that surrounded the Partnership in Power package. Subsequently, narratives of government and its anticipated difficulties are outlined. Next, the narratives of Labour's cultural turn are analysed, particularly in relation to their emphasis on ideas about 'partnership'. In addition, the temporal politics of these narratives and the way they engaged with notions of history are examined. Finally, the tensions between these ideas about a productive and harmonious party culture and emphasis upon the parliamentary component of Labour's political identity are discussed.

## Agreeing the Partnership in Power Reforms

The package of reforms that eventually came to be known under the banner of 'Partnership in Power' had historical roots stretching back to the leadership of Neil Kinnock, when the consideration of Labour's policy-making structures and the advent of the NPF first came about. The reforms that were developed following Blair's election covered similar terrain, though with a much more acute focus on how a Labour government would function. With this came a concern with consolidating the status of Labour's policy-making and governance institutions. After his election as Leader in 1994, Blair charged then General Secretary Tom Sawyer with the task of preparing Labour's organisation for government. This was premised on considering the potential issues and problems a future Labour government might face, particularly when it came to issues of intra-party conflict and cohesion.

During this period, the turn to the individual that had characterised Labour's previous years stuttered as elite concerns about 'management', and the experience of the *Road to the Manifesto* process and Clause IV ballot, left a consensus amongst party managers and the leadership that introducing further plebiscitary measures would not be good for the Party in office.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that collectivism crept back in, but that the expansion of individual member-centred processes was halted. Instead, focus shifted to considering party culture in a much wider sense. The initial work on this project involved a series of workshops at Cranfield University, in which the General Secretary and NEC members sought to schematise Labour's political culture and chart visions for a future party ethos rooted in concord and co-operation.<sup>4</sup>

The formal work of the project then began a year later. At the beginning of 1996, the NEC gave approval for the broad terms of the project and the setting up for four task forces. These task forces were named The NEC at Work, Relationships in Power, Strengthening Democracy, and Building a Healthy Party, and were led by Maggie Jones of Unison, Mo Mowlam, Margaret Wall of the MSF, and Diana Jeuda respectively. Dennis Skinner was the only NEC member to vote against approving the project. His opposition was

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: Study in the Politics of Party Management*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014). p. 216.

<sup>4</sup> Florence Faucher-King, *Changing Parties: An Anthropology of British Political Party Conferences*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). p. 181.



consistent and he regularly voted against the ‘modernising’ position whenever deliberations surrounding Partnership in Power made their way to the NEC.

Throughout this process, direct public argument surrounding the reform package or that contested its broad aims was rare, and much of the debate surrounding these changes took place behind closed doors, within the confines of these working groups or at the NEC. On a few occasions, key union figures, such as Ken Jackson of the AEEU, made known publicly their concern for maintaining the weight of union votes at Labour Conference.<sup>5</sup> But the open and heated conflict that had often come with organisational changes in preceding years did not take place.

This is not to say that consensus over the practicalities of reform always existed or was easy to find. The retention of a women’s section on the NEC, the floated possibility of ‘non-executive’ NEC members, the membership of the NPF and the degree of restrictions over contemporary resolutions at Conference each formed areas of internal debate and contention. Figures like Clare Short and David Blunkett were sceptical about changes to the power of Conference to put forward its own resolutions, which were to be more tightly controlled in scope and number. And, whilst many of the leading trade unionists were sympathetic to the search for a more consensual way of functioning, they were keen to ensure they did not lose their influence. But, in the run up to the 1997 election and after Labour’s substantial victory, there was little appetite for the kind of open conflicts of previous decades.<sup>6</sup>

This broader consensus at elite level was also reflected within the grassroots organisations rallying around the reform package. The LCC, once a grassroots organ of Labour’s left, continued in its reincarnation as a source of a great deal of grassroots support for ‘modernisation’. This shift had been gradually building since Kinnock became Leader in 1983, as the organisation turned away from its initial relationship with the ‘hard’ left and the CLPD. They put forward the most radical proposals for change, which included the scrapping of CLP General Committees and a series of measures to equalise the perceived disparity between the enfranchisement of ‘super-activists’ and ordinary members. Caroline Flint, then a leading figure in the LCC, wrote in *Renewal* of the need for the Party to shake off the shackles of its current way of doing politics that stifled genuine

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<sup>5</sup> See Ian Morrison, ‘AEEU Warns Party Against New Curbs’, *The Morning Star*, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1997. p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Lewis Minkin, ‘The Blair Supremacy’, pp. 200-228.

engagement with the wider community and deliberation about local issues. And, in line with their leadership's focus on engagement, she argued that, 'we have come a long way from defining party democracy as holding those above accountable'.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side of these debates, organisations like the CLPD continued to push for Conference and its delegates to have full rights in terms of amending any policy document of the Party. Parallel to this, the Labour Reform Group embraced the principles of a more participatory and representative party structure but pushed against any attempts at centralisation. This was symbolic of what was generally wide agreement over the participatory and inclusive ideas behind change but friction over what this should look like in reality at the grassroots level.

The package that resulted from these discussions and deliberations constituted a series of changes to the policy-making structure of the Party, the form and role of the NEC and the way that the Party's Annual Conference worked. The NPF, first established under Neil Kinnock, was given a formal place within Labour's policy-making process and became the centre of a more developed and extended discussion in a two-year policy cycle. The scope of these discussions was to be determined by the new JPC, the composition of which drew together representatives from the NEC, NPF and Labour's ministerial team.

Once determined, the policy review process would separate out into policy commissions that would draw submissions from the unions, affiliates, CLPs, local fora and external bodies. In conjunction with this change in process, the Annual Conference was reformed and its involvement with policy-making reduced. Debate would now focus on the policy documents of the NPF, over which Conference would only have meaningful influence when 'alternative positions' were presented to be voted upon. This could only happen two out of five years in the policy cycle. Furthermore, contemporary resolutions, whilst retained, were restricted to a small number and could only be on subjects not already being covered in other debates.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the composition of the NEC was reformed. The women's section was abolished and replaced by a quota system to ensure the representation of women on the Party's governing body continued. Furthermore, Labour

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<sup>7</sup> Caroline Flint, 'Shaping Up for Government: the LCC's Commission on Party Democracy', *Renewal*, 4:2, 1996, p. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Meg Russell, *Building New Labour: The Politics of Party Organisation*. (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). pp. 200-5.

councillors, the PLP and European Parliamentary Labour Party (EPLP), and the government were each to have dedicated places.

Whilst these changes represented substantial structural shifts, they were also the subject of important narrative shifts when it came to the cultural politics of the Party and considerations of Labour's political identity amongst 'modernisers'. Narratives about the potential problems a Labour government might face underpinned this shift.

### **Narratives of Government: Preparing for Office**

Following Blair's victory in the 1994 leadership contest, he and his supporters placed a renewed focus on securing the Party's return to government. The organisational reforms that became known as Partnership in Power formed a particular part of this focus in the narratives built by Blair and his supporters. Previous episodes of organisational reform in which the 'modernisers' had dominated were often narrated in terms of their capacity to improve Labour's election performances. However, during the development and agreement of the Partnership in Power proposals, and as Labour appeared increasingly likely to win the next election, real stress was placed upon imagining and solving the potential problems that Labour would face in government. It was through these interpretations of Labour's readiness of office that the package of change was argued for and justified.

Under the stewardship of Blair, the drive to remake Labour as an organisation was sustained, as reforming 'moderates' continued to dominate the Party's left in arguments about the necessity and form of change. By the mid-1990s, the sense that party change was an essential response to the electoral circumstances facing Labour was firmly entrenched and well-rehearsed story of renewal. At the Special Conference of 1995, which saw the formal change of Labour's Clause IV, Blair declared:

I did not come into this Labour Party to join a pressure group. I didn't become Leader of this party to lead a protest movement. Power without principle is barren. Principle without power is futile. This is a party of government or it is nothing, and I will lead it as a party of government.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Report of the Labour Party Conference 1994 and Special Conference 1995*. (London, Labour Party, 1995). p. 291.

This government-focused spirit was pervasive and permeated the elite narratives surrounding the Partnership in Power project. In order to govern, Labour had to win the next General Election. However, it was never really anticipated that the changes constituting the Partnership in Power reform package would have any great direct effect upon the outcome of this next election through material change to party structures.

One exception was the review of the workings and effectiveness of local labour parties that were said to have the potential to ‘enhance our readiness’ for the Party’s next outing at the national polls.<sup>10</sup> Considerations of the workings of the NEC also noted the need for it to be more focused on electoral politics. Changes to the functioning of the NEC were designed with a greater administrative and organisational electoral focus from the centre in mind. A summary of the problems identified with the working of the NEC compiled by Maggie Jones, a UNISON official and member of the taskforce charged with developing the work conducted in Cranfield on the deficiencies of the Party’s governing body, noted that the ‘NEC [is] not sufficiently focused on winning elections.’<sup>11</sup> A governing body with a far more limited role in policy-making and with streamlined sub-committee procedures, which no longer required the approval of the entire NEC, were pitched as an important part of the antidote to this problem.

Beyond a limited focus on the benefits of change to any impending election, the electoral concerns that were built up around the Party and tied to the need for organisational reform took on a more forward-looking orientation. These reforms were not about mobilising Labour more effectively at the next election – which it looked increasingly likely to win – but about governing effectively and securing subsequent victories thereafter. The result of this was a narrative of government in which the elites involved in the design and delivery of the Partnership in Power package projected Labour forward in time and into a position of power in British politics, a position that it had not seen for almost 20 years.

Given that the changes to the policy-making process and the NEC were designed largely to take effect after a 1997 win, it is unsurprising that the Labour landslide in May was not the end of these arguments. The large scale of Labour’s victory was not taken for granted as some sort of wholesale permanent conversion of over 40% of voters to the Party’s

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Note from the General Secretary’, Labour Party General Secretary Papers, Box 856, LHASC.

<sup>11</sup> Maggie Jones, ‘Letter to Bob Fryer’, General Secretary’s Papers, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1996, LHASC.

cause.<sup>12</sup> General Secretary Tom Sawyer told a meeting of the PLP that ‘the campaign for the next election begins now’.<sup>13</sup> Partnership in Power was part of this campaign. The final report of Partnership in Power produced in the run up to the 1997 Conference noted how ‘damage that was done to the Conservatives by the impression that they were a deeply divided party’ in terms of their public support. In response, the report sought to couch the organisational reform project as one that was focused in such a way as to ‘provide a basis for securing the Labour victories of the future’.<sup>14</sup> In commending the report to Conference, Tom Sawyer again emphasised this in describing the package as ‘the foundation for another Labour victory and another, and another.’<sup>15</sup>

At the very heart of this winning formula lay an attempt to prevent the internal turmoil that had come to characterise the Labour governments of years past.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, in these narratives of government, electoral anxieties and issues of party management became increasingly intertwined. In particular, there were real concerns that, if the Party was not reformed in order to improve its capacity to work together, the ensuing disunity could bring a Labour government crashing out of office. Thus, resolving issues of party management meant resolving one potentially substantial barrier to Labour securing multiple terms in office.

Interpretations of Labour’s past experiences in office informed the way in which a future Labour government and its internal relationships were viewed.<sup>17</sup> Sawyer argued in 1997 just before Conference approved his reform package that:

In the past we have not always been united. When we have been divided, we have lost the people’s trust, and you all know what happens when parties lose the trust of the people. They get punished at the ballot box, and we have been punished. We have never had two terms of office, because after every election, after every single term, the divisions in one form or another have opened between the Party and the government and we have lost. We must never let that happen again.<sup>18</sup>

Surmounting this kind of strife was central to Partnership in Power. Through a mixture of redefined roles and process, a new relationship was to be forged which struck a balance

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<sup>12</sup> See Steven Fielding, ‘Labour’s Path to Power’ in Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge (eds.) *Labour’s Landslide: The British General Election 1997*. (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997). pp. 23-36.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Richards, ‘The Battle of the Machines’, *New Statesman*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1997. p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> *Partnership in Power*. (London, Labour Party, 1997). p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997’, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Webb, *The Modern British Party System*. (London, Sage, 2000). p. 203.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Continuity and Change in New Labour’, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997’, p. 11.

between membership input and leadership independence.<sup>19</sup> As Diana Jeuda described to Conference in 1996 as Chair, it was a project ‘designed to think what needs to be done to build and sustain a really fruitful relationship between a Labour government and the Labour Party’.<sup>20</sup> This was echoed by the Partnership in Power consultation document, as it outlined how the NEC had come to a collective conclusion that there was a need to forge ‘effective and fruitful partnership arrangements at all levels in the Party and between the Party and a future Labour Government.’<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, UNISON’s submission to the Partnership in Power consultation argued that ‘it is crucial to the success of a Labour government, and to the winning of a second and third term, that the Party remains united, with clear objectives’.<sup>22</sup>

The reforms aimed explicitly ‘to build a healthy party representative of the communities we serve and a strong partnership with the new Labour government.’<sup>23</sup> It was argued that, within this new framework of party governance and policy-making, ‘there can be disagreements, but overall it’s important to be supportive rather than antagonistic, because if we are not, we won’t win a second term.’<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve this, both structural reform and clarity about the role and belonging of party institutions was needed. In 1995, Robin Cook described the need to combat the unhelpful ambiguity surrounding the status of the NPF and how it had become necessary to get across the ‘legitimacy of this body and the fact that it belongs to the movement’.<sup>25</sup> Electorally damaging infighting could, it was argued, result from confusion and an unnecessary suspicion about Labour’s organisational settlement that already existed.

Clarity of purpose was also needed in the adjustment of the place of other bodies in the policy-making process. Assessments of the NEC exemplify such concerns. Those on the taskforce considering such issues concluded that it was key that the status of the NEC was reaffirmed as being ‘a supporter of the Party in government’ and that this would necessitate ‘a high degree of trust, plus NEC involvement in policy making. The role of the JPC would be crucial but could only work if the rest of the NEC also felt “involved”.’

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Continuity and Change in New Labour’, pp. 132-5.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1996’, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Labour into Power: A Framework for Partnership*. (London, Labour Party, 1997). p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Maggie Jones, ‘UNISON Submission to the Party in Power Consultation’, General Secretary’s Papers, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1997, LHASC.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Partnership in Power’, p.2.

<sup>24</sup> Steve Richards, ‘Interview: Tom Sawyer’, *New Statesman*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1996. p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Labour to Raise Profile of Policy Forum’, *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1995. p. 5.

Beyond this, it was judged that a 'strategy for dealing with conflict was also needed even if the priority was mechanisms to minimise or avoid such conflicts by prior consultation and communication.'<sup>26</sup>

In the midst of these arguments, the place of Labour's grassroots and characterisations of them did retain some importance. 'Modernisers' did also focus on the better settlement that they believed members would get. Speaking in the summer after Labour's election victory, Sawyer said:

I think there's a hell of a lot of this that will be to the benefit of party members and I think party members will be able to play a much wider and deeper role in shaping party policy and a much more meaningful role in the Party Conference, so we've got to make our case and the people who disagree with us will have to make theirs and at the end of the day, of course, the Conference, sovereign as it is, will decide.<sup>27</sup>

One of the leading figures behind change set about grounding reform, at least in part, in the dissatisfaction of the grassroots. Despite any disagreements about the precise form of change, the need for change was cast as a real attempt to respond to calls for greater participation. This was to be achieved by offering the grassroots more meaningful opportunities to engage with policy-making that went beyond ballots: 'Motions will still be voted on, but many delegates feel disconnected, so the emphasis should be to get more of them involved by breaking the Conference down into small groups.'<sup>28</sup>

As in the years of 'modernisation' that had taken place since 1983, issues of party management remained important to the way that those in positions of power in the Party were describing the need for organisational reform. Indeed, between 1994 and 1997, the emphasis on imagining Labour's potential problems in office, particularly by drawing on interpretations of its past, were elevated in their importance. Partnership in Power was pitched as a solution to these predicted troubles. With a new policy-structure, clearly defined roles and a more representative (and not union-dominated) NEC, Labour would find itself in a more unified and effective state.

Beyond these narratives of government, a more substantial shift was going on in terms of the cultural and temporal politics of party reform. Whilst previous episodes of organisational change had mostly relied on considering 'structure', party elites developed

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<sup>26</sup> 'Party into Power Taskforce 2 "Relationships in Power" – Minutes of the Second meeting of the Taskforce 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1996', LHASC Labour Party General Secretary papers, Box 856.

<sup>27</sup> 'Transcript of the World at One BBC Radio 4 04/07/97 – Debate on the nature of Labour Party Conference', General Secretary's Papers, Box 856, LHASC.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Richards, 'Interview with Tom Sawyer', p. 21.

new narratives surrounding Labour's political culture from 1995 onwards. In these narratives, Blair and his supporters articulated a need for Labour to consider its own culture, foster notions of partnership and interrogate more explicitly the history that had the potential to shape understandings of its conduct of government within the Party.

### **Narrating a New Culture: Partnership, Responsibility and the Reinvention of Tradition**

Whilst previous episodes of organisational reform had seen 'modernisers' feed narratives of Labour's political circumstances into stories about Labour's temporality and the ameliorating capacity of individualised democratic practices, the Partnership in Power project was rooted in a more extensive consideration of Labour's culture. With this came a more explicit focus on schematising the implications of the Party's 'ways of working' for a future Labour government, and charting how these issues could be resolved. These considerations came with particular resolutions, specifically the notions of 'partnership', 'responsibility' and 'stake-holding' that were emphasised frequently by Sawyer and others developing the reforms and trying to 'sell' them to other party elites and the grassroots.

While previous episodes of reform had been marked by the use of particular interpretations of the Party's past, reformers in this period went further and also critiqued the way in which the Party related to history in a much broader sense. In this respect, the temporal politics of this particular episode were as much metahistorical as they were historical. Whilst the spectre of the last Labour government and the intra-party strife that came with this undoubtedly took centre stage when it came to constructing the necessities of cultural change, Sawyer and others sought to advocate for a vision of Labour's identity rooted in a positive relationship with its history in a more fundamental sense. This meant combatting a perceived tendency for the Party to relate to its history, and to remember, in a way that focused on negativity, strife and conflict. Instead, they anticipated there would be much to gain from the Party focusing on positive things it had achieved in years gone by.



*Cultural Consciousness, Responsibility and Partnership*

Arguments about Labour's culture had always been important to the way elites narrated organisational change within the Party. Whether in the historically-rooted assertions that the left were making in the late 1970s about the successive betrayals of Labour governments, or in Kinnock's contention in the late '80s that the Party's organisation was decrepit despite its intrinsic importance to its mission, Labour's culture was always a site of debate. However, Partnership in Power took ideas about culture to new and more critical heights, as the elites shaping reform described (and sought to respond to) the enmeshed nature of political structure and organisational culture. This was done in order to solve more effectively pervasive underlying concerns about Labour's potential for disunity and self-destruction.

The immediate root of this narrative shift began with the conduct of a series of extraordinary workshops on party culture and organisation. With the help of the academic Gerry Johnson, the workshops took place in the June and July of 1995 at Cranfield University and saw a large number of the Party's NEC and the General Secretary search for greater clarity about the problems and solutions facing Labour as an organisation. Initial work considered the purpose and function of the NEC specifically. Subsequently, attention turned to the culture of the Party more widely. In the course of these workshops, influential and important figures in the process of organisational change came together in a new consideration of the impact and importance of culture on the progress of the Labour Party.

Working in groups, these individuals co-operated to develop a picture of what they saw as the interlinking relationships between the cultural elements of the Party (stories, symbols, rituals and paradigm) and its organisational elements (power structures, organisational structures, systems for control).<sup>29</sup> This framework was drawn from Gerry Johnson's work on the importance of considering symbolic action in the management of change.<sup>30</sup> The purpose of this exercise was to schematise Labour's culture and, as a result, recognise the way in which this might impact upon the Party's ability to achieve its goals, in electoral and, in particular, governmental terms. As a summary of the workshops

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<sup>29</sup> There are multiple examples of the completion of Venn diagrams by NEC members to this effect in Tom Sawyer's papers at the LHASC.

<sup>30</sup> See Gerry Johnson, 'Managing Strategic Change; the Role of Symbolic Action', *British Journal of Management*, 1, 1990, pp. 183-200.

explained, the aim was to consider the purpose of the NEC and the Party structures more widely and ascertain ‘through a cultural analysis what are the blockages to achieving the agreed purpose? What should the culture be; and what should be the priorities for action to deliver this?’<sup>31</sup>

The language of elites involved in the organisational change process was considerably influenced by the work undertaken at Cranfield. The consideration of ‘culture’ was a central aspect of each of the four working groups focused on the NEC at Work, Relationships in Power, Strengthening Democracy and Building a Healthy Party respectively. Consequently, proposals for the package of reforms took on a scope that was substantially broader than had previously been the case by considering the Party’s ways of doing and relating that went beyond focussing on processes in isolation. Consequently, and in a marked difference from the ‘modernising’ reform in preceding years, the term ‘culture’ itself took on new significance. Characterisations of party culture, and visions of cultural change, formed a meaningful part of the narratives that the architects of the reform package put forward. This focus was though, in an important sense, restricted in that the emphasis was placed upon party culture, without any real concern for the culture of leadership.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, the stories elites involved in the development of the Partnership in Power package told focused on how this could be changed and ‘improved’. Such ‘improvements’ were argued to be the good of the Party. Much of this focused on moving the Party from an apparent culture of confrontation to one of professional co-operation, open dialogue and supportive discussion. In this vein, the General Secretary argued to colleagues that the NEC:

...needs to complement and support the work of the Leader and the government – when the Leader comes to NEC meetings he needs to feel that he is cooperating there with a group of colleagues who after debate and discussion around strategic issues will take those strategic issues, turn them into goals and targets and follow them through in the Party.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ‘A Summary of the Content and Output of Labour Party NEC Workshops at Cranfield School of Management’, Labour Party General Secretary papers, Box 856, LHASC.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis Minkin, ‘The Blair Supremacy’, p. 204.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Verbatim Report Wednesday 30 October 1996 – Party into Power – Present: Tom Sawyer, Maggie Jones, Bob Fryer’, Labour Party General Secretary papers, Box 856, LHASC.

Following this, the particular focus on the NEC and ensuring that it worked well with the Leader became much more than a concern rooted in the raw power or processual politics of the situation. As the NEC report of January 1997 put it:

The project took us beyond the immediate structural arrangements and ways of working in the Party to examine what we refer to as our “culture”. By the culture of the Party we mean the symbols and defining characteristics. Although organisational cultures are notoriously elusive and difficult to pin down, it is evident that the culture can exert major influence upon both the form and content of relationships and, as such, is crucial to our examination of the Party into power.<sup>34</sup>

This meant taking a more instrumental approach to party culture itself and focusing on this aspect of the Party’s organisation when considering reform. This broadening of focus resulted in a symmetrical widening of the means by which such change could be achieved, with elites emphasising the importance of considering carefully the way they conducted reform and spoke about it.

Sawyer’s immediate concern after the completion of the workshops that ‘cultural change is incorporated into what we do’ was reflected in the very language used to describe Labour’s culture and, subsequently, the need for the Partnership in Power proposals.<sup>35</sup> Elites sought to achieve cultural change both by structural reform itself and in their telling the story of this change, embedding new meanings and relationships through language. These responses were rooted in a notable rhetorical shift, aimed at embedding the values that those backing reform wished to see instilled in the Party. Thus, whilst elite narratives of Labour’s political circumstances were important to establishing a broader need for the consideration and implementation of reforms, their narratives of cultural renewal articulated new meanings when it came to Labour’s own cultural fabric.

These ideas about cultural change were tied to shifts that were going on in the Party as a community, particularly with membership growth. During this period, Labour experienced a spike in its membership numbers, which peaked at just over 400,000 in 1997. The drive for membership increases had been an important part of the New Labour project under Blair. There was particular concern for developing a membership that could better reflect the communities Labour wanted to represent and act as a line of communication between the government, party and constituents.<sup>36</sup> In the early days of

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Labour into Power: a Framework for Partnership’, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Note from the General Secretary’, LHASC Labour Party General Secretary Papers, Box 856.

<sup>36</sup> Hugh Pemberton and Mark Wickham-Jones, ‘Labour’s Lost Grassroots: The Rise and Fall of Party Membership’, *British Politics*, 8:2, 2012, pp. 181-206.

reform, the momentum of cultural renewal was tied to this expansion. Maggie Jones told the 1995 Conference that:

Our new members are changing the culture of the Party. As they come into positions of influence at local and national level, they will change the face of the Party too. We are becoming literally a new Labour Party.<sup>37</sup>

Labour's growing number of participants was characterised as a new wave of political supporters ushering in a new style of politics. With new people came new lessons about how politics within the Labour Party should be done. This presented a real opportunity to push forward and remake culture that was seen by the designers of Partnership in Power as embedding discord and disunity. In setting their sights not just on structural change, but on a complementary change in the meanings engrained within Labour's political practices, Sawyer and others went well beyond the organisational considerations that had taken place in the Kinnock and Smith years. They ambitiously set about attempting to redefine the very norms and meanings that set the boundaries of appropriate political discourse, action and expectation within the Party.

In this vein, the 'modernisers' relied on notions of 'responsibility' and 'partnership', as they began their drive to embed a new culture of productive unity through developing new and less antagonistic understandings of the roles of party members, the NEC and the leadership. At the Labour Conference of 1996, Tom Sawyer told delegates that the Party would soon move from:

the trappings of opposition and we will have in our hands responsibility for working with a Labour government. That responsibility will belong to all the Party, not just to the NEC, the PLP or the Cabinet. It will belong to the whole of the Labour Party; it will be our responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

This was reiterated this in 1997 when the package of reform was presented to Conference for approval, with the General Secretary arguing Partnership in Power was the sign of:

a party taking responsibility on the basis of the membership of a healthy party, and when it is healthy, when it represents people and when it governs, it becomes something more. It becomes a stakeholder party and those people become stakeholders, because they do important work, because they grow and they learn, because they take responsibility.<sup>39</sup>

Labour's elites were ever more aware that it would take more than changing the formal rules and structures of the Party's political processes to achieve the harmonious settlement

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<sup>37</sup> *Report of the Ninety-Fourth Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, (London, Labour Party, 1995). p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1996', Friday 4<sup>th</sup> October, Morning session.

<sup>39</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997', p. 12.

they sought for the Labour government. Only through this could Labour move away from a dysfunctional culture of blame and antagonism and towards a unified, co-ordinated and effective set of norms built around its new policy procedures. Through this emphasis on responsibility, it was intended that each member would understand his or her role and value. And, that each member would know the limits of this and the importance of respectful and meaningful communication between all. As Peter Mandelson put it, changes to the policy-making process and the reorientation of debate away from Conference and into the setting of policy forums was done with a view to ‘creating a relationship of mutual respect between the leadership and party members.’<sup>40</sup>

These themes of responsibility, and the language of ‘stake holding’, each had a much wider currency within the New Labour’s cultural and ideational milieu. Noel Thompson has described how Labour revisionism and the ‘Third Way’ were based on a view of citizens and consumerism that accented the importance of ‘the virtues of self-restraint and discipline.’<sup>41</sup> In addition, Jeremy Nuttall has written how ideas about personal responsibility were a larger part of the New Labour philosophy and the qualities it sought to induce amongst the British people.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, that the end goal was a party of ‘stakeholders’ reflects language and ideas which had wider pertinence in this particular period, especially in relation to New Labour’s political economy and the potential of ‘stakeholder capitalism’.<sup>43</sup>

It was in this wider ideational context that, in 1996, the General Secretary acknowledged that:

Trust and partnership are the most difficult things to achieve and are very hard to build once they have been damaged. But achieve them and build them, we must. They are essential if we are to have the Labour millennium that Tony spoke about on Tuesday and so many delegates have argued for this week.<sup>44</sup>

Partnership in Power was about building just such trust. In order to achieve this, not only did the advocates of these reforms seek to reorient the norms of cultural interaction

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Mandelson, *Labour’s Next Steps: Tackling Social Exclusion*. (London, Fabian Society, 1997). p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Noel Thompson, *Social Opulence and Private Restraint: The Consumer in British Socialist Thought since 1800*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Jeremy Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism: The Labour Party and Qualities of Mind and Character 1930 to the Present*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> For an example of the way that ideas of ‘stake holding’ featured in social democratic analyses of Britain’s economic situation in the 1990s, see Will Hutton, *The State We’re In*. (London, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1996’, Friday 4<sup>th</sup> October, Morning session.

through the meanings they attached to change. They brought this new cultural consciousness to bear on Labour's memory and the Party's relationship with the past.

### *Reinventing Tradition*

Narratives of time, tradition and 'modernity' combined in the new cultural understandings constructed by Labour elites. As a result, the new cultural concern fostered by those driving reform in the leadership and on the NEC was exercised in two distinct but complementary ways. Firstly, there was a particular scrutiny afforded to the vernacular histories of Labour's difficulties in government and the ways that the reification of these episodes contributed to the emotive and intermittently tense relationship between members, activists and the leadership. Adjacent to this focus was wedded to the continued emphasis upon the more material dysfunctionality of Labour's historical ways of working as an organisation. Thus, this period saw Labour's apparent need for reform situated within a combination of new cultural understanding and historicist tropes that had been a part of the narrative logics of 'modernisation' in some form for over 10 years.

In the context of Labour's organisation Meg Russell has argued that Tony Blair, as the Leader and key driver behind the Partnership in Power package, felt less bound by Labour's traditions than his predecessors and that this informed the drive for new structures.<sup>45</sup> But, in this, the very nature of tradition is underexplored and its complexity obscured in ways that are acknowledged in other scholarly work. In 1983, Eric Hobsbawm asserted that some 'traditions' were not real but constructed as part of a desire to give change the appearance of continuity.<sup>46</sup> Others soon pointed out that distinguishing between the real and the invented is intrinsically problematic.<sup>47</sup> Tradition is rather part of what Samuel and Thompson later described as an 'active relationship between past and present'.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the complicated nature of 'tradition' means that we must focus on stories that produce, assert and argue over its definition and implications, rather than its

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<sup>45</sup> Meg Russell, 'Building New Labour', p. 142.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983). pp. 1-14.

<sup>47</sup> See for example Peter Burke, 'The Invention of Tradition by Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger', *The English Historical Review*, 101:398, 1986, pp. 316-7.

<sup>48</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, 'Introduction' in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds.) *The Myths We Live By*. (Abingdon, Routledge, 1990). p. 5.

apparent role in the more straightforward accounts of structure and agency of political behaviour.

Moreover, this work on tradition does not just support the need to consider the complexity of the way that elites engaged with notions of tradition during this period. It was itself an important part of the cultural and intellectual context of the 1990s, and emerged in the run up to the Labour Party's own cultural turn that underpinned its attempt to build a 'partnership' in power. In the preceding decade, the idea of tradition had come up for grabs. New thinking about the nature of tradition and its relationship to modern society was taking place across the British left, and not just in the Marxist works of Eric Hobsbawm or Raphael Samuel. By the turn of the decade, Anthony Giddens, intellectual architect of the 'Third Way' that sat behind core aspects of New Labour thinking, was writing about how modern societies exhibited more conscious relationships with their pasts and traditions. He argued that a key feature of what he termed 'the reflexivity of modern social life' was a more critical approach to the inheritance of established ways of thinking or behaving. In this regard, he described how 'to sanction a practice because it is traditional will not do; tradition can be justified, but only in the light of knowledge which is not itself authenticated by tradition.'<sup>49</sup>

In line with this reasoning, Labour's elites did not just untie themselves from the Party's organisational tradition in the space afforded by a new structural opportunity when looking to redesign and reform the way the Party worked. Instead, they actively took steps to define and reinvent Labour's traditions of memory and practice against the weight of history and in the face of what they argued to be compelling circumstances. The Party's leadership were making a conscious and explicit attempt to reinvent the traditions of their party.

'Modernisers' invoked the spectre of the last Labour government and its bleak end, now almost 20 years prior. Jon Lawrence has described how such moments in Labour's history have formed an important part of the mythologies that have been both crucial to Labour's identity and provided ammunition for internal disagreement.<sup>50</sup> Elites seeking reform gave credence to the idea that Labour could, even after years of reform, still make the damaging choice to remain trapped by this difficult history. More scrupulously than ever before,

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*. (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990). p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Labour – the Myths it has Lived By' in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (ed.) *Labour's First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007). pp. 341-66.

these histories were presented as ones which were avoidable through the elevation of rationality and the instilling of a new culture of positive recollection, openness, optimism and dynamism. In summing up the historically rooted force of Labour's last return to opposition from government, Tom Sawyer wrote to NEC members and senior party officers in the wake of the Cranfield workshops, acknowledging:

...the wide recognition that only by building a different relationship between the Party Leader, the NEC and the Party members can we avoid the pitfalls of distrust and betrayal that apparently bedevilled previous Labour Government/Party relationships.<sup>51</sup>

Changing the organisation of Labour, the way policy-making worked and the way it was *felt* to work, was to be crucial to bringing about a new deal between all sections of the Party. UNISON's submission to the Partnership in Power consultation echoed these sentiments, stating that 'it is often felt now that the Party worked against itself in the '70s and '80s and this must not be allowed to happen again.'<sup>52</sup> Later, in his autobiography, Blair noted that his reading on Labour's past governments had shown him that once the Party got into office 'a dangerous tension between activists and ministers' emerged and 'they moved at remarkable speed into inhabiting separate political cultures.'<sup>53</sup>

The party's left, at their lowest ebb of influence, still refused to accept this characterisation of the Party's past or the idea that it was the divisions themselves that led to Labour's defeat. Ken Livingstone instead attempted to use the recollections of Denis Healey against Sawyer by suggesting that 'if the last Labour government had paid more attention to the early warning signals expressed by the Party Conference, they might not have lost the 1979 General Election, which brought Margaret Thatcher to power.'<sup>54</sup> But with reduced influence at the top of the Party or amongst the unions, and in the face of an exceptionally popular Labour Prime Minister, there appeared to be little currency for such a vision of the Party's past.

The solutions to the 'old' problems that the architects of New Labour narrated lay both in new structures, and in new ways of recollecting the 'old'. Located within these stories, there existed a history that was both acknowledged and challenged. The elites driving and presenting the reforms increasingly sought to recast difficult pasts – through the force of language – as histories of emotion and 'feeling'. These reflexes were, they suggested,

<sup>51</sup> 'Note from the General Secretary', Labour Party General Secretary's Papers, Box 856, LHASC.

<sup>52</sup> Maggie Jones, 'UNISON Consultation Submission'.

<sup>53</sup> Tony Blair, *A Journey*. (London, Arrow Books, 2010). p. 101.

<sup>54</sup> Ken Livingstone, 'An Unequal Kind of Partnership', *The New Statesman*, 29<sup>th</sup> August 1997, p. 12.



contestable and avoidable. These memories of conflict and despair were culturally engrained. Consequently, the 'tradition' of Labour's gloomy historicised pessimism became a target for change. Through rhetoric, Labour was actively reimagined as a party conscious on its journey that could make new choices about its own past. In these choices, Labour could find a way to 'celebrate our achievements and positive successes and minimise our tendency towards a complaint culture, so that stories of defeat and losses are replaced by positive stories of success and achievement.'<sup>55</sup> This was an attempt to remake Labour's myths and, as a result, rework the collective psychological relationship between the Party and the past in order to respond to contemporary circumstances and anticipated necessities of government.

Thus, Partnership in Power was made to be about more than just a response to current circumstances. It was crafted as a response to Labour's own memory, paving a way forward for a new historical culture. As Tom Sawyer put in when commending the Partnership in Power package to Conference in 1997:

...our differences at those times need not have been so great, but they were unresolved in my view because the Party did not have a permanent ongoing mechanism or any permanent institutions, like, for example, a stakeholder policy forum where members could be properly represented, or a participative national Conference where a real dialogue and discussion could take place with the government, where we could keep talking, listening and working together instead of making speeches at each other. That is what I offer you today and I urge you to take it.<sup>56</sup>

From scrutinising Labour's traditional ways of remembering sprung a push for reinvention. Labour members need not feel betrayed and they need not feel so through a hampering culture of memory that was characterised as actively perusing Labour's graveyards of turmoil and defeat. This can be seen in the context of a wider labour movement that Patrick Wright once described as having a tendency to engage in ways of remembering that past that constituted an 'unreflected yearning' that amounted to 'a celebration of defeat'.<sup>57</sup> Partnership in Power was pitched as offering them a new relationship defined against this conception of, and relationship with, the past.

In setting aside these ways of relating to a particular version of Labour's history, the Partnership in Power package was also moulded as an answer to the Party's outdated processes and ways of doing politics. Nick Randall has argued that New Labour was the

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<sup>55</sup> 'Improving the Party, Preparing for Government', Labour Party General Secretary's Papers, 1996/97 Partnership in Power, LHASC.

<sup>56</sup> 'Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997', p. 11.

<sup>57</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country*. (London, Verso, 1985). p. 156.

assertion of a particular label over the dominion of time, the function of which was to draw lines – though not always cleanly – between Blair’s party and ‘old labour’. Whilst making this distinction, Labour was then presented as a resynchronisation between the Party itself and new political, economic and social circumstances.<sup>58</sup> This is as true in organisational terms as it is in terms of policy and marketing strategy. Partnership in Power was about shedding Labour’s historical baggage when it came to policy-making and the structural dispersal of responsibilities.

Labour’s organisational traditions were not only conceived of as inherently pessimistic in terms of their influence on the Party’s cultural psychology. They were also argued to be intrinsically inefficient and slow-moving, now outmoded and desynchronised with Britain’s fast-paced world in practical senses. This was a continuation of the logics of ‘modernisation’ that had begun under Kinnock. Peter Mandelson described how, through ‘modernisation’, Tony Blair was ‘determined that there will be no repeat of past experience.’<sup>59</sup> This is symptomatic of what Finlayson has described as the diagnostic capacity of New Labour’s use of the discourses of modernity, which acted to shape both the understandings of circumstances and the meanings of the leadership’s responses.<sup>60</sup> On the approval of the Partnership in Power plans at a meeting of the NEC on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1997, the Leader emphasised that it was ‘an important step for the Labour Party which, if Conference agrees, will enable us to ensure that our modernisation continues.’<sup>61</sup> Changing the Party’s way of working meant speeding Labour forward in time, away from the difficult experiences it ought to forget and ever closer to the leading-edge of modern-day governmental and political practice.

This conception of Labour’s historic structural baggage was reflected by the moderniser-dominated LCC, who told their members in 1996 that ‘Labour is a nineteenth century organisation with twenty first century aspirations.’<sup>62</sup> Conference and the policy-making procedures were a particular target of these characterisations and was described as a clunky but fleeting moment in policy-making that was inappropriate and ineffective in

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<sup>58</sup> Nick Randall, ‘Time and British politics: Memory, the Present and Teleology in the Politics of New Labour’, *British Politics*, 4:2, 2009, pp. 186-216.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Mandelson, ‘Labour’s Next Steps’, p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Alan Finlayson, *Making Sense of New Labour*. (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 2003). pp. 66-94.

<sup>61</sup> Michael White, ‘Labour NEC Backs Big Changes to Curb Dissent’, *The Guardian*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 1997.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Labour Activist – Special Conference Edition 2’, General Secretary’s Papers, Box 856, 1<sup>st</sup> October 1996, LHASC.

the political terrain at the turn of the millennium. John Evans MP described at the Labour Conference of the same year how current procedures meant that the Party had:

Not much more than 1,000 seconds to set the agenda for the next 1,000 years and the opportunity for a constituency to contribute a few words to one composite resolution once a year can hardly be described as perfection in party democracy and membership involvement.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, Prime Minister Blair told party members in Darlington in the run up to the Conference of 1997 that ‘Conference should not be open season for those who want to pull the Party apart or decide the whole of a complicated policy area in one-and-a-half hours on a Monday morning. It is an archaic way to make policy.’<sup>64</sup> Thus, the Partnership in Power reforms were made to be about more than just managing the Party and responding to the electoral circumstances. They were about breaking from old and ineffective ways of doing. It was this shift, and ‘modernisation’ more broadly, that Blair later argued meant that it was Labour that would ‘liberate Britain from the old class divisions, old structures, old prejudices, old ways of working and of doing things, that will not do in this world of change.’<sup>65</sup>

The minority of party members, activists, politicians and trade unionists against change were cast as perpetuating backwardness. Robin Cook directed his opening remarks to these opponents as Chair at the Conference of 1997, at which the proposals for reform were to be approved. He told delegates that:

Of course, I understand the view of traditionalists that love the Party Conference and do not want to see any change. All I ask is that they do not pretend that Conference procedures frozen in our history will give a stronger role for delegates.<sup>66</sup>

According to New Labour’s leading lights, those who rejected change were comforting themselves with familiarity, rather than acting upon any analysis the actual workings of Labour’s democratic process. Mo Mowlam, then Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and popular amongst delegates, urged Conference-goers to accept the reforms before them, arguing that ‘if people are going to believe that we are going to modernise Britain, they have to believe we are going to modernise the Labour Party’.<sup>67</sup> In all of this, the past

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1996’, Friday 4<sup>th</sup> October, Morning Session.

<sup>64</sup> Tony Blair quoted in Stephen Castle, ‘Eyes forward, Blair’s back’, *The Independent*, 31<sup>st</sup> August 1997.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Tony Blair’s Full Speech’, *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1999. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/1999/sep/28/labourconference.labour14> (Accessed 18th August 2017).

<sup>66</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997’, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

became something to break with in organisational terms, with change a symbol of modernity, efficacy and efficiency in New Labour's journey.

Thus, through the Partnership in Power package and the rhetoric that enveloped and defined these reforms, elites sought both to rework the relationship between Labour's culture and Labour's past and to break from these pasts through structural change. 'Modernisers' drove change under the auspices of much more than the rational computation of the immediate circumstances facing the Party. The substance of Labour's traditional ways of remembering its past and traditional ways of organising formed part of what was a far broader argument about the place and culture of Labour in history and its relationship with these entities than in previous years. They asserted the necessity and appropriateness of change and the Partnership in Power package in clear reference to these elements. Those pushing for reform sought to grasp the opportunity of this present and to reorient what they argued was the Party's traditional gaze towards dark, clunky and dysfunctional histories to brighter memories and more rewarding and dynamic futures.

### **Narratives of Democracy and Participation: Government over Party**

If 'modernising' the Party and its identity meant adjusting the relationship between party culture, structure and history, then it also meant continuing to reimagine Labour's intra-party politics and relationship with parliamentary democracy in order to better synchronise party practices with contemporary times and the demands of government. In their narratives of democracy, elites supporting Blair and the Partnership in Power project sought to reshape understandings and expectations about what democracy meant as a cultural practice within the Party, especially in office.

Orwell once described how:

In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently, the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in George Bott (ed.) *George Orwell: Selected Writings*. (London, Heinemann, 1958). pp. 80-1.

Certainly, in the episodes of organisational reform the Party went through after its 1979 election loss, *narratives* of democracy bore some similar traits to the specific word itself as Orwell describes. Across the previous decades, stories about the relationship between Labour and democracy had been drawn upon by different sides of the Party, with different focuses and to different effects. But, whilst fluid and often imprecise, these democratic visions had substance. At times, the gap between those debating Labour's proper relationship with parliament and its responsibilities to the movement seemed insurmountable, and the two sides never reconciled their opposing visions. It is clear that at these particular moments in the Party's organisational history, stories of democracy and the Party's democratic identity were often steered by Labour's elites in particular – if imprecise – directions. In this case, whilst the focus on individualisation was largely left settled, and narratives of 'partnership' were central, the way in which New Labour's democratic story was conceived often pointed towards the predominance of parliament and government in subtle but important ways.

As has been described above, the reforms were premised on the idea of some form of partnership and two-way dialogue existing between the Party and the government. On this occasion, this did not mean the extension or reformation of OMOV ballots. The emphasis that had once been placed upon the extension of individual balloting was not continued into the Partnership in Power project, particularly after experiences of the *Road to the Manifesto* and Clause IV plebiscites that had been the source of some internal friction.<sup>69</sup> Instead, attentions turned to reorienting understandings around the collective institutions that remained or those, like the NPF, that had been established or consolidated. 'Modernisers' stressed the need for Labour's structures to be representative of the world beyond Labour (rather than the collective body of the Party as it was) and visions of participation largely rooted in a focus on 'voice' rather than 'choice'. Through this voice, members would have a meaningful outlet but, at least ideally, understand that the government's first priority in a parliamentary democracy was to the people that elected it.

This predominance was not total or always clear. Architects of the package paid considerable lip service to the idea of greater involvement for Labour's growing membership. Some, like Robin Cook, stressed the capacity of these reforms to bring about

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<sup>69</sup> Lewis Minkin, 'The Blair Supremacy', p. 216.

more control and power for party members through a more direct appraisal of changes to Conference and policy-making:

The “Partnership in power” proposals will give more power to delegates: the power to amend policy documents, not just the formal right to agree to them: the power to vote on which resolutions we debate: not just accept some choice of the Standing Orders Committee, the power to question and demand answers of Cabinet ministers, not just the obligation to sit there and to applaud dutifully when they finish. Let us this week give Conference modern procedures that will give delegates real say in how our policy is made.<sup>70</sup>

Such characterisations of reform were moulded in the shape of more traditional concerns with democracy as power. Here, reform is described as a mechanism for altering the balance in favour of members and as a curtailment of leadership independence or union dominance.

Whilst building up the Party membership would play an important part in remedying this problem, these new members of Labour’s community needed to be engaged, involved and have their voices heard. Changes to policy-making, the functioning of Conference and the purview and representative structure of the NEC were each heralded as a way of bringing a more suitable democracy to the Party. Subsequently, the combination of a redefined policy process with a renewed political culture would allow the Party to resynchronise its internal politics with the ‘real’ world as it was. By reorganising, Labour could focus on representing this wider world and including the electorate whilst it continued to push for growth in both membership and support.

The redesigning of Labour’s policy-making processes and Conference were seen as a crucial part of this necessary shift, not least because these reforms were seen as part of a broader change going on in British society and the workplace. Reflecting back on this period Sawyer described how ‘modernisation’ was taking place in the world beyond Labour itself:

People were at least starting to be consulted at work. The unions were being consulted. They were starting to be listened to, they were starting to have an actual say on what happened to them at work.<sup>71</sup>

This ultimately meant that Labour too needed to be prepared to provide ‘a more open, democratic, inclusive party.’<sup>72</sup> Despite the internal uneasiness there had been about

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<sup>70</sup> ‘Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1997’, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Tom Sawyer, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

putting the Partnership in Power proposals out for wider consultation, spreading a sense of greater involvement was the goal.<sup>73</sup>

It was also argued that there needed to be a more direct link between the Party and those that trade union executives and activists ‘falsely’ claimed that they represented. Looking back on what he crafted as the historical roots of intra-party reform in 1995, Tony Blair described how:

In terms of democratic organisation, as mass activism died and people stopped turning up in large numbers to union or party meetings, so the Party machine became a shell, prey to factionalism and sectarianism...It looked democratic but it wasn't. The key democratic link – which should be that between the Party and the real people it seeks to represent – disappeared. Members of a 1970s CLP General Committee might say they represented the membership; union executive members might say they represented their members; but the truth was that often they didn't.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, Labour's past was not just one of clunky dysfunctionality or doom-saying but also, in fundamental respects, a deviation and subversion of a particular vision of democratic principles in which the primary focus of the Party was to be connecting with ‘real people’. It was through these narratives of democracy that these particular notions of democratic disconnect and disengagement were articulated.

However, ‘modernisers’ shied away from placing a singularising focus on issues of organisation as ones of power and participation. Instead they edged towards redefining democracy and aligning it more closely with the respectful, forward looking and responsible culture. The entire package was pitched as one that had the capacity to deliver the ‘continuous dialogue’, which had otherwise been absent and at the root of Labour's many organisational and political problems.<sup>75</sup> The formal institutionalisation of the NPF as the hub of the policy-making process was pitched as a move that would construct a body ‘representative of the whole party’. In its more open style, it would be capable of ‘fostering new forms of policy deliberation’.<sup>76</sup>

When campaigning for its passage, Tom Sawyer stressed that Partnership in Power was a concrete response to a genuine need for a:

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<sup>73</sup> See Lewis Minkin, ‘The Blair Supremacy’, p. 212.

<sup>74</sup> Tony Blair, *Let us Face the Future – The 1945 Anniversary Lecture*. (London, Fabian Society, 1995). p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Partnership in Power’, p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

method that gives party members an opportunity to get into meaningful dialogue with the Government and with senior politicians to be able to have a real influence on policy which they don't have at the present time.<sup>77</sup>

The 'real influence' spoken of was not a clear, direct and procedural power but the capacity to shape the Party through respectful dialogue. The very notion of democracy as power to the grassroots was being subtly challenged and the authority of the Party over the government itself contested.

Dues were still paid to the 'traditional' ideas about the Party's federal structure. It was always emphasised that Conference would remain the final and sovereign body of the Party and its decision-making process. However, it was made part of a much wider set of procedures that accentuated democracy as the provision of forums for debate and discussion. In bridging these parts of Labour's new democracy, the Partnership in Power document that explained the package to members described how:

As the Party's sovereign body, Annual Conference should reflect all that is best about the Party and its values. Under our proposals for a more systematic and deliberative policy-making process, Conference would: remain the sovereign policy and decision-making body of the Party, debate subjects in greater depth, have a new power to vote on alternative positions within policy statements, debate motions on contemporary issues, with delegates choosing the priorities, including innovations such as question and answer sessions with ministers, promote active participation by delegates and dialogue with government.<sup>78</sup>

The framers of reform conducted a careful balancing act between allusions to power as actual influence and the opportunity to be involved in discussions and debate. More than ever though, democracy was characterised as a performance rather than the exercise of real control: always constructive, always respectful – but not always embedding procedural accountability and power through collective politics in the way the Party's left had consistently sought.

This balancing act reflected the way in which some of the more critical trade unions and their General Secretaries had sought to articulate their concerns about the reform package. The TGWU outlined their red lines in their submission to consultation, stating their belief 'that the sovereignty of Conference must remain at the apex of Party organisation.'<sup>79</sup> Concessions were gained during the process to allay these fears. Union support was secured by allowing the NPF to present alternative positions to Conference on which it

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<sup>77</sup> 'Transcript of the World at One BBC Radio 4 04/07/97'.

<sup>78</sup> 'Partnership in Power', p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> 'Labour into Power: A Framework for Partnership – Submission by the T&G', General Secretary's Papers, LHASC. Box 856.



could then vote and the commitment of space at Annual Conference for the discussion of contemporary issues to be chosen by ballot.<sup>80</sup> In the spirit of reassurance, the Partnership in Power document described in 1997 how ‘it is precisely because of the pre-eminence of the decisions of Conference that our reforms seek to ensure that Conference’s deliberations are comprehensive, relevant, focused and involve as many delegates as possible.’<sup>81</sup>

Within these particular institutions though, the actual substance of democracy was being narrated in a way that moved it away from solely being about issues of power and control. Through this, ‘democracy’ was reworked to be as much a style of politics that facilitated voice, as a set of ideas about power and legitimacy. Tom Sawyer later reflected that:

If by democracy you mean people being listened to and having a chance to make an impact – they were never going to be the minister and everybody knew that. They were never going to be the minister. But they used to leave thinking “well we’ve had a bloody good moan this morning. At least we have had our say.” Maybe “we’ve changed our minds” even.<sup>82</sup>

Here, democracy is imagined as a political praxis marked by its openness to expression and deliberation, rather than a particular formation of power or authority. This shift tied together a new cultural consciousness in its behavioural and temporal senses and a crucial motif that had been central to the very conduct and meaning of organisational change throughout the Party’s history for actors on all sides.

Within these narratives of partnership and responsibility, there did exist a clear emphasis on the central place a Labour government would have and the leading role it would take.<sup>83</sup> In past episodes, the relationship between Labour as a party or movement on the one hand, and parliament and government on the other, had been a particular point of tension. Indeed, during the period 1979-81, this tension had been at the heart of an identity crisis that underpinned the fracturing of the Party and the formation of the SDP. By the mid-1990s, Blair and his supporters were increasingly dominant, confident in their position and in articulating Labour’s identity in terms of the centrality of the Labour leadership and the dominance of a Labour government. It was through this logic that the final document outlining the changes sought to make clear the responsibilities of the Party in

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<sup>80</sup> Meg Russell, ‘Building New Labour’, p. 143.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Partnership in Power’, p.7.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Tom Sawyer, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Minkin has noted how, in retrospect, the inclusion of this language had more importance than was initially anticipated. See Lewis Minkin, ‘The Blair Supremacy’, p. 203.

relation to the Labour government and argued that ‘for the government to stay in tune with the Party, the Party must stay in tune with the nation.’<sup>84</sup> The responsibilities of the government to the nation and to those that elected it came first. Only through engaging with these people could the Party expect to develop a ‘real’ partnership.

In contrast to the dominant ‘modernising’ views of the Party as primarily parliamentary, the Labour’s ‘hard’ left continued to hold their movement vision of Labour’s identity and argue it was destined to fail to achieve its political goals without meaningful and substantial controls over the politicians it put into power. But, with New Labour peaking and left-wing influence at its lowest ebb, such ideas were of little impact and articulated at a substantially lower frequency than in years past.

Diane Abbott, a significant figure of the Party’s left who was on the NEC during this period, argued that the consequence of the reforms that Sawyer and his colleagues proposed would be disastrous. In a letter to the *New Statesman*, she argued that ‘the Labour Party belongs to its members and is the political expression for millions of people who have no other voice. Tom Sawyer wants to smash its internal democracy for short term convenience.’<sup>85</sup> In 1997, Ken Livingstone similarly argued that the Partnership in Power reforms offered no real partnership and failed to acknowledge the degree to which party accountability could maintain Labour’s position in government. He insisted that, over the course of a government, having ‘the checks and balances of a democratic party are essential.’<sup>86</sup>

Figures from Labour’s left continued to argue that the ‘modernisation’ of party democracy was an affront to the rightful authority and power that should be afforded to the Party’s grassroots. They suggested that the move towards a relationship defined by the dominance of Labour’s parliamentary wing, and by extension the Labour government, took the Party away from its roots and would only usher in a more dysfunctional term in office. But, with little real influence to speak of, and a party now returning to office and dominated by their opponents and a largely supportive soft-left, these visions of Labour’s politics had little impact or importance.

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<sup>84</sup> ‘Partnership in Power’, p. 5.

<sup>85</sup> Diane Abbott, ‘Lording it at the Top’, *The New Statesman*, 26<sup>th</sup> July 1996, p. 36.

<sup>86</sup> Ken Livingstone, ‘An Unequal Kind of Partnership’, p. 12.

## Conclusion

As Labour approached the election, and then made its way back into office, the ‘modernisers’ driving reform placed renewed focus upon the importance of preparing the Party for government. They argued that it was this shift, and the Party’s potential for internal conflict, that now presented the single greatest organisational obstacle to its continued success. Partnership in Power was pitched as the solution to these problems and underscored by new narratives about the Party’s culture and its impact. Under Sawyer’s guidance, and through the workshops in Cranfield, culture itself became the subject of a new interrogation and the focal point of an instrumental turn by elites towards the behaviours and meanings embedded within the Party’s processes.

Consequently, these reforms should be understood as a confluence of more well-worn ideas about structural change and a newer and more critical consideration by party elites of the importance of culture, language, identity and expectation. It was in this vein that Sawyer and those around him sought to take the Party from confrontation to respectful unity and ‘stake-holding’, and to remould the Party’s memory from negative remembrance of strife and decline to a positive celebration. These elements became part of what it meant to ‘modernise’. However, despite these attempts at cultural reinvention, the way in which narratives of responsibility and partnership were built, and a concurrent stress on the importance of the Party’s leadership and the predominance of parliament, left a muddled conception of Labour’s organisational identity. This perpetuated, rather than resolved, the tensions between movement politics and parliamentary democracy that had shaped its organisational history and identity in previous years.

The real eventualities of this package were not what many had hoped for, and remained some distance from the optimistic combination of hierarchy and two-way deliberation that those driving the reforms had outlined to the Party as a whole in setting out its organisational future. Minkin and others have explained how the managerial realities and centralised control of the New Labour government were far from what could be genuinely described as mutually participative.<sup>87</sup> That the organisational politics that arose from this package did not meet the descriptions that had been put forward, embed beyond doubt

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<sup>87</sup> Eric Shaw, ‘New Labour in Britain: New Democratic Centralism?’, *West European Politics*, 25:3, 2002, pp. 147-70; Lewis Minkin, ‘The Blair Supremacy’.

the parliamentary focus of the Party as a whole, or end the Party's oppositional culture in any substantial sense underscore the precariousness of the futures that were articulated.

Beyond this, the temporal and cultural politics of this episode and the wider 'modernising' claims that had underpinned 'New' Labour as a whole had important consequences for the Party's organisational politics in recent years. After the Party's defeat in 2010, the New Labour years and the break with the past it supposedly represented left, even in terms of party organisation, an awkward temporal and narrative legacy for the Party and for Ed Miliband.

## **8. Remaking a Movement: ‘One Nation’ Politics and Party Reform 2010-15**

After their 1997 election victory, the Labour Party held office for 13 consecutive years. As the business of government took priority, few significant changes were made to the organisational structure of the Party during this period. In 2007, Tony Blair stepped aside as Prime Minister and Labour Leader. Gordon Brown was unchallenged as his successor and led the Party into the 2010 election. The result was a hung parliament. By 11 May, it had become clear that Labour’s attempts to negotiate a place in a coalition had failed and Gordon Brown resigned as Labour Leader.<sup>1</sup>

Newly returned to the opposition benches, a leadership contest began. Ed Miliband emerged victorious, pipping his brother David Miliband to the post. In the final round, Ed Miliband was declared the winner by a margin of less than 2%. He had benefitted substantially from the support of the trade unions in the affiliates section of the Electoral College. The close nature of this victory and its dependence on the unions resulted in a context within which Ed Miliband was forced to defend his legitimacy and deny he and Labour were somehow in the ‘pocket’ of the trade unions.<sup>2</sup> This was the beginning of a difficult five years. The new Labour Leader battled to take on the coalition government, throw off the ‘left-wing’ and union puppet image that both the Conservatives and sections of the press were set on giving Miliband and the Party, and respond to the awkward legacy of the New Labour years.<sup>3</sup>

In and amongst these wider political challenges, Ed Miliband’s tenure proved to be a particularly significant one for the organisational form and identity of the Labour Party, its relations with the trade unions and for Labour’s contemporary politics. Initially, Miliband had sought, with the help of Peter Hain, to restructure the Party’s membership structures and root it in the communities it sought to serve through the Refounding Labour package. Whilst much was made of these reforms, opposition from the unions meant little by way of meaningful change was achieved. Following this, a saga centred on the alleged

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<sup>1</sup> See Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, *The British General Election of 2010*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Dorey and Andrew Denham, ‘“O, Brother, Where Art Thou?” The Labour Party Leadership Election of 2010’, *British Politics*, 6:3, 2011, pp. 286-316; Hugh Pemberton and Mark Wickham-Jones, ‘Brothers All? The Operation of the Electoral College in the 2010 Labour Leadership Contest’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66:4, 2013, pp. 708-31; Thomas Quinn, *Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain*. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). pp. 64-82.

<sup>3</sup> For an effective review on the broader legacy of the New Labour project see Richard Heffernan, ‘Labour’s New Labour Legacy: Politics after Blair and Brown’, *Political Studies Review*, 9:2, 2011, pp. 163-77.

wrongdoing of the Unite union in the selection of a parliamentary candidate in the seat of Falkirk. In response, Miliband, through negotiation with union leaders, introduced a set of substantial changes. The most consequential of these targeted the nature of the relationship between Labour's affiliated unions and the Party itself, rid the Party of its Electoral College process for the selection of its Leader and Deputy Leader and reshaped its categories of membership. These changes are the primary focus of this chapter.

This chapter argues that the narratives surrounding reforms that came out of the Falkirk selection saga represented a further shift in Labour's identity towards individual political practices and away from collectivism. As Miliband and his supporters changed the Party's structure, through negotiation with the Party's affiliated unions, the language they used to justify and characterise these changes also went through another important shift. In particular, through a combination of familiar stories about Labour's history and its need to be organisationally adaptive, Miliband and his supporters mapped out a vision of 'One Nation' politics and articulated a need for change that went wider than responding to the Falkirk incident. Subsequently, Miliband returned to notions of the importance of building a movement and combined this with a now well-worn emphasis on the importance of individualising the Party's politics in order to make its practices 'legitimate'. Thus, more so than in years past, narratives about Labour as a movement took on new forms and currency. However, as Ed Miliband urged the Party to rebuild itself in a form that repurposed the idea of what it was for the Party to be a movement at all, the rise of *individuals* from all walks of life was to be embraced as the organisational antidote to party decline and Labour's electoral defeat.

In the face of these arguments, some key union figures and Labour's most left-wing politicians sought to advocate for the continued importance of collectivist politics and to assert the value of the Labour-union link. With negotiation, Miliband was able to secure the conditional consent of major trade union figures. This included Len McCluskey of Unite, Paul Kenny of the GMB and Dave Prentis of UNISON, who consistently spoke in critical terms about the changes and the possibility of further reform but ultimately supported the package itself. Other figures on the left from within the PLP and party's grassroots continued to find themselves without significant influence as in the preceding decades, though maintained that collectivism was a legitimate part of Labour's traditions. Similarly, union leaders were continually keen to emphasise their rightful place by virtue of their founding of the Labour Party and the legitimacy of their collective involvement.

Despite this, the Labour Leader and his supporters were successful in instituting sizable changes to the Party's structures and largely dominated the presentation and justification of these.

As a whole, the coexistence of these different arguments underscores the continued plurality of ideas about organisational form and purpose within the Labour Party. However, this set of recent organisational changes, and the narratives that characterised them, highlight how the dominant visions of Labour's organisational identity have continued to correspond to the individualising logic that first took hold in the Party under Neil Kinnock and throughout the making of New Labour (with the exception of the Blair years).

This chapter first charts the gestation of Ed Miliband's party reforms in 2014, the Refounding Labour package and the narratives surrounding the Falkirk saga as it erupted. Subsequently, narratives of historical continuity are explored before the more transformational aspects of Miliband's look to Labour's movement past are analysed.

### **Refounding Labour, the Falkirk Selection Saga and Party Reform**

Ed Miliband focused on organisational issues early in his tenure as Leader, as he sought to put the Party through a broad process of contemplation and renewal in relation to both policy and intra-party structure. This was done with a view to engineering a clear break from the New Labour years and its subsequent electoral defeat. The organisational culmination of this early push for change came in the form of the Refounding Labour package in 2011. Led by Peter Hain, these reforms were intended to bring about a transformed Labour Party that was better connected to communities and rebuilt as a movement. This was to be achieved by introducing – amongst other things – a tiered membership structure that would now include registered supporters.<sup>4</sup> However, in the face of union opposition, the most fundamental aspects of reform were watered down. The attempt at change resulted in the rewriting of only a small part of Labour's constitution and the removal of previous arrangements that had permitted some Labour members multiple votes in leadership contests. And, whilst the registered supporters

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<sup>4</sup> See Peter Hain, *Refounding Labour to Win: a Party for the New Generation*. (London, Labour Party, 2011).

scheme was introduced, for this group to have any say in leadership contests it had to reach over 50,000 people in size – a number it never got close to before the next set of reforms in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

The largely insubstantial settlements reached by the Refounding Labour package were initially as far as the Labour Leader was willing to push. However, the unwillingness of Ed Miliband to take on his party and the unions all changed in the wake of an incident surrounding the selection of a parliamentary seat in Falkirk. Claims emerged that Unite the Union had signed up a substantial number of its members in order to ‘rig’ the selection of its preferred parliamentary candidate in the Scottish seat after the controversy-laden resignation of brawling MP Eric Joyce. Unite’s Len McCluskey and Ed Miliband initially engaged in a war of words about the incident. They were to become the key players, along with the other union General Secretaries, in the deciding the shape organisational change would take.

The nature of Ed Miliband’s close Electoral College victory and the importance of trade unions to his defeat of the other contenders, including his brother, made the relationship between the Labour Leader and the unions a politically sensitive topic from the very start of his leadership. Concern about Ed Miliband’s ‘left-wing’ image and media presence was further heightened by the continued use of the moniker ‘Red Ed’ – particularly by papers identifiably on the right of the political spectrum and with large readerships like the *Sun*. This focus was accompanied by the publication of a series of articles in the *Daily Mail* intent on framing the Labour Leader as the inheritor of ‘loony left’ politics bequeathed by his Marxist academic father Ralph Miliband.<sup>6</sup> The Falkirk selection incident acted to compound concerns that Ed Miliband was under the thumb of the Unite, too left wing and – as a result – incapable of running his party or the country.<sup>7</sup> David Cameron sought to exploit this idea soon after news of the selection incident broke.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, Miliband came under substantial pressure to respond the electoral threat

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<sup>5</sup> See Dan Hodges, ‘Refounding Labour has Changed Nothing – but Tells us a Lot’, *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2011. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/21/refounding-labour-changed-nothing-ed-miliband> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See Ivor Gaber, ‘The “Othering” of “Red Ed”, or How the Daily Mail “Framed” the British Labour Leader’, *Political Quarterly*, 85:4, 2014, pp. 471-9.

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Bale, *Five Year Mission: The Labour Party under Ed Miliband*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015); Eunice Goes, *The Labour Party under Ed Miliband: Trying but Failing to Renew Social Democracy*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016). pp. 60-3.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Watt and Patrick Wintour, ‘David Cameron Taunts Ed Miliband Over Links to Union’, *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/03/david-cameron-ed-miliband-union> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017).



and make changes to the way Labour related to the unions.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after, he used a speech in St. Brides on 9 July to announce an ambitious plan for party reform. Whilst he referred to the possible introduction of primaries for candidate selection and spending caps in candidate selection contests, the most consequential reforms related to the way that the trade unions affiliated to the Labour Party, to the leadership election process and membership structures.

According to Declan McHugh of Labour's Constitution Unit, whilst the reforms that followed did have within them an enduring sense of political vision about the building of a new political movement, the changes themselves were 'not the culmination of a carefully crafted modernising plan. Rather, it was the product of political panic, damage limitation and – ultimately – a deal with the unions.'<sup>10</sup> Thus, whilst Miliband's St. Brides speech started the gun on organisational change, there was a long way to run. Attention turned from electoral concerns to how meaningful change to the way the Party works could be managed and negotiated within the Party and with key union players. Ray Collins, the former Labour General Secretary and influential trade unionist, was brought in to lead a review of party organisation and broker a deal. One senior party official later remarked that it was notable that 'the main protagonists [of the Falkirk row] immediately became the chief makers of reform' creating a dynamic that was very unlike previous debates around organisational change.<sup>11</sup> The major points of contention revolved around the unions' financial linkage, the future of the Electoral College mechanism for leadership elections and the possible financial implications of these changes.

McCluskey, had become increasingly convinced that the status quo of the union link had proved itself to be a financially inefficient process and bore little fruit in terms of influence for his own union. Consequently, he embraced the proposals to change the union link that Miliband had first outlined, even though he maintained his union had done nothing wrong in Falkirk itself. These changes re-cast the financial relationship between the affiliated unions and the Labour Party by introducing an opt-in process. This meant the membership fee of individual unionists could only end up in the hands of the Labour Party, via their union's political fund, if they actively chose to be a part of this affiliation.

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<sup>9</sup> Toby Helm, 'Reform Labour Party or Face Certain Defeat, Insiders Warn Ed Miliband', *The Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Declan McHugh, 'Why Did Labour Use this System to Elect its Leader?', *The New Statesman*, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/elections/2015/09/why-did-labour-use-system-elect-its-leader> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with senior party official, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2015.

McCluskey deemed Unite to be in a good position to benefit from such changes. Paul Kenny of the GMB, who cut affiliation payments but ultimately led his union in supporting the package, was hostile to the logic of the changes and argued against reforms going any further on the basis that they represented an attack on the right of the unions to be involved in Labour Party affairs. In all of this, the voices of members were sought in consultation, but their level of influence appears to have been minimal. NEC veteran Ann Black voiced some concern that even in the process of consultation, there was little transparency about the impact that members voices were having on the decisions being made about reform.<sup>12</sup>

After negotiation and formal consultation, the introduction of the individual opt-in for trade unionists was secured. In addition, in order to facilitate the expansion of membership categories to incorporate full members, affiliated supporters from the unions and registered supporters from beyond the Party in a way that did not reduce union influence in the selection of Leader, the Electoral College was to be scrapped. In its place there was to be an election system that operated on a One Person One Vote principle and functioned as a form of semi-open primary.

Plans for primaries in candidate selections were limited to the selection of the Labour candidate for the London mayoral contest of 2016 due to internal disagreements and financial concerns about running costs, but spending caps were agreed for selection contests in which only full members would have voting rights. In the face of substantial concerns from various groups in the Party, the Collins Review concluded that ‘it is clear from the majority of feedback that there is limited appetite within the Labour Party for the widespread use of primaries at this time.’<sup>13</sup> Despite the concessions on primaries, a Special Conference in March of 2014 voted 86.29% in favour of the plans arising from the Collins Review. Miliband had overseen some of the most fundamental changes to Labour’s structural relationship with the trade unions in its long history and a considerable reshaping of the process that would be used to select the leadership.

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<sup>12</sup> Ann Black, ‘Labour at the Crossroads: What the Members Think’, *Left Futures*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2014. Available at: <http://www.leftfutures.org/2014/01/labour-at-the-crossroads/> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

<sup>13</sup> ‘Ray Collins, *Building a One Nation Labour Party: The Collins Review into Labour Party Reform*. (London, Labour Party, 2014). p. 34.

### **Narrating a Saga: The Falkirk Selection Incident and the Labour-Union Link**

The eruption of the Falkirk selection incident, and open argument between Ed Miliband and his supporters and those from or backing Unite, marked the beginning of narratives surrounding the more consequential changes to Labour's union link and membership structures that were agreed in March of 2014. With allegations swirling about Unite's involvement in the selection procedure, Miliband and his supporters engaged in substantial public argument with Unite over the propriety of their actions and the necessity of considering the relationship between the Party and its affiliates more widely. In the face of this, McCluskey was particularly vocal in his opposition to the way in which these events were being characterised and sought to assert the right of his union to seek to get the candidates it wanted selected.

These narratives were the only the beginning of what became a more considerable debate about the way that the Party should organise in relation to its union founders, and in relation to the electorate more widely. Indeed, they effectively operated as a proxy for these wider debates, revealing clear tensions and divisions between the Labour leadership and affiliated unions over the method and extent to which unions should involve themselves in party affairs. Together, this marked a further period of introspection when it came to the Party's organisational identity.

Issues surrounding the selection of the parliamentary candidate in Falkirk had been largely kept behind closed doors until the Falkirk CLP was put into special measures at the end of June, following an internal investigation by the NEC. After this, tensions began to build between the Labour leadership and Unite. By July, these were boiling over in public, as each side put forward its take on what had happened, who was at fault and whether Unite's signing up of hundreds of members in order to influence the selection process was consistent with party rules.

Jim Murphy, then Shadow Defence Secretary, came out with strong criticism of Unite on 3 July 2013, as the arguments around the Falkirk selection began to spill over into the public sphere. He told the BBC that:

While trade unions are an important part of a society and our politics, there seems to be one trade union in particular that has well and truly overstepped the mark. It's clear

that Unite don't run the Labour party – Ed Miliband does. And we should never confuse those two things.<sup>14</sup>

A day later, Tom Watson resigned as Election Co-Ordinator and Deputy Chair of the Labour Party over his links to the incident, in order to avoid placing in jeopardy ‘the future unity of the Party’.<sup>15</sup> He was accused of aiding Unite in their attempts to secure their preferred candidates in parliamentary selections, including the selection of his then office manager Karie Murphy in Falkirk itself. In the wake of this, Angela Eagle described how ‘being proud of our trade union links doesn’t mean we can tolerate what went on in Falkirk...we have to ensure that our parliamentary selections are fair and transparent with integrity and we have to look after the Labour Party’s rules.’<sup>16</sup>

The Labour Leader himself also came out strongly against Unite and McCluskey, characterising the episode as something beyond what could be considered acceptable within the Labour Party under his leadership. In the face of a defiant Unite, Ed Miliband argued firmly that:

Instead of defending these practices, Len McCluskey needs to face up to what happened in Falkirk. This can have no part of the Labour Party, and no part of the kind of politics we believe in, and no part of the kind of politics that Len McCluskey should be believing in. Instead of throwing allegations around in the way he is, he should be facing up to his responsibility, not to defend this kind of machine politics.<sup>17</sup>

In another media interview, in responding to the developing arguments around the incident, he stated that ‘I am not going to have abuse of membership procedures and parliamentary selections in my party....I want to be clear about that to the leadership of Unite the Union in particular.’<sup>18</sup> Thus, for Ed Miliband and his team, Unite’s behaviour was unacceptable and signalled a deviation from the rules of the Party. The Labour Leader and his immediate supporters argued that by seeking to influence the outcome of the selection process such that it did, Unite had engaged in the kind of politics that Labour and anyone who supported it should be set against.

In response, McCluskey took on the task of defending his union’s involvement. He did so vocally, criticising the way that the Party was handling the incident and defending the

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<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Watt, ‘Jim Murphy: Union has Overstepped Mark in Selection of Labour Candidate’, *The Guardian*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/03/jim-murphy-union-labour-falkirk> (Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Tom Watson, ‘Resignation Letter to Ed Miliband’, *The Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/04/tom-watson-resignation-letter-ed-miliband-full-text> (Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>16</sup> *Newsnight*. Television Programme. 4<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Newsnight*. Television Programme. 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

<sup>18</sup> *Daily Politics*. Television Programme. 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

right of his union to organise in order to get the candidates it wanted selected. In late June 2013, McCluskey wrote a letter to Unite members in the Falkirk constituency and made clear that, from his perspective, all that Unite had done in its involvement in the parliamentary selection in that constituency was above board and within the existing rules of the Labour Party. He told his members:

Let me make it clear that at all times we have operated fully within the Party rules and have acted just as the Party wishes us to do in recruiting more members to Labour. We will not let your conduct be called into question. It is certainly our belief that Labour needs more trade unionists in Parliament, as opposed to seats being handed out on a grace-and-favour basis to Oxbridge-educated "special advisers", but we make no apology for that. Labour's future depends on it becoming more representative of the communities it seeks to represent.<sup>19</sup>

His take on Unite's involvement in Labour's candidate selections had wider pertinence that went beyond the Falkirk incident itself. A few months prior to the eruption of the Falkirk selection incident McCluskey had spoken in similar terms about the influence of his union in the selection of candidates for the European elections, arguing that it was justified on the basis that they were merely matching the influence of others with input of their own. In an interview in the *New Statesman*, he stated that:

The truth is that this is a process that was set up by Tony Blair, and the right-wing and organisations like Progress have had it their own way for years and years and have seen nothing wrong in it...Because we're having some success, suddenly these people are crying foul. Well I'm delighted to read it. I'm delighted when Blair and everyone else intervenes because it demonstrates that we are having an impact and an influence and we'll continue to do so.<sup>20</sup>

In the face of what he argued to be a fudged investigation into the whole incident, in which even the police were contacted, he went on to describe how he was 'obliged to uphold the integrity of Unite' and that he could 'no longer do so on the basis of going along with the activities of a Labour party administration in which I can place no trust.'<sup>21</sup> He described the response of Miliband and his supporters as them being 'caught up in

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<sup>19</sup> George Eaton, 'McCluskey Denounces "Smear Campaign" and Threatens Legal Action Against Labour', *The New Statesman*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2013. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/06/mccluskey-denounces-smear-campaign-and-threatens-legal-action-against-labour> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016).

<sup>20</sup> George Eaton, 'Len McCluskey: If Ed Miliband is Seduced by the Blairites, He'll be Defeated', *The New Statesman*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/04/len-mccluskey-if-ed-miliband-seduced-blairites-hell-be-defeated> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Labour Crisis as Tom Watson Quits and Unite Union Claims Stitch-Up', *The Guardian*, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2013. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/04/labour-tom-watson-unite-union> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016).

anti-union Tory hysteria.’<sup>22</sup> For McCluskey, Unite’s involvement was consistent with both the rules and principles of Labour’s organisation and its relationship with its affiliated trade unions.

Thus, the Falkirk selection incident formed the basis of an initial row over the Labour-union link and the way that this manifested within the Party’s organisational politics when it came to candidate selection. These narratives of Labour’s selection saga rapidly developed into a more substantial and much wider consideration of the Party’s organisational structures, particularly when it came to the way that the funds from the affiliated unions passed to the Labour Party and the way that their members were included within membership structures. Whilst initial arguments turned around the specifics of the Falkirk selection incident, these soon expanded out into a much larger set of issues. By July 9<sup>th</sup>, in his One Nation Politics speech, Ed Miliband was outlining a much more ambitious and far-reaching organisational response to what he was now couching as a wider set of problems surrounding union engagement in the Party and political mobilisation as a whole. In doing so, he, his supporters and Ray Collins, a former Labour Party General Secretary and trade unionist brought in to conduct a review and mediate a settlement, placed these issues of intra-party organisation in a much wider narrative about Labour’s history and the importance of a movement renaissance.

### **Looking Back to Move Forward: One Nation Politics and Narratives of Historical Adaptiveness**

Whilst the scheme through which Unite had attempted to influence the selection of Karie Murphy in Falkirk was swiftly closed, Miliband decided to press ahead with party reforms. Through these he could speak of Labour’s organisational identity and political ethos in much grander terms. In doing so, he moved the debates surrounding Falkirk forward, expanding the terrain they covered by drawing heavily on histories about the Party’s past adaptiveness in order to justify changes to the union link, leadership contest and membership structures.

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Unite Chief Len McCluskey Attacks ‘Disgraceful’ Labour Handling of Falkirk Controversy’, *The Telegraph*, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2013. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/labour/10163004/Unite-chief-Len-McCluskey-attacks-disgraceful-Labour-handling-of-Falkirk-controversy.html> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> August 2016).

For the strongest advocates of reform, and Ed Miliband and his supporters in particular, stories about the past rooted change within a particular vision of the Party's identity. In this, seeking reform to the way that Labour did its politics was justifiable in the setting of a history of Labour that focused on how undesirable aspects of party organisation had endured well beyond what the Party's founders had apparently intended. In this respect, the narratives of those advocating most strongly for reform from within the Party largely reproduced the same logics that had been relied upon by 'modernisers' for decades and covered similar historical terrain, albeit largely without specific recourse to the language of 'modernisation' itself.

Subsequently, Ed's move toward a 'One Nation' politics was presented as the culmination of a more recent history of party change that had begun under Neil Kinnock in the 1980s and continued right through the New Labour years. This was combined with a vision of Labour's organisational identity that reached further into the past. In this vision, it was argued that the Party's organisation had been designed with future adaptation in mind, even at its foundation, but that the Party still had not changed to the degree needed for success in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Such versions of history gave an overarching continuity to a set of reforms that were in structure highly consequential and – as is discussed further below – the site of a substantial shift in the Party's organisational identity when it came to notions of the Party as a movement.

In the face of such language about the relationship between Miliband's drive for party reform and the Party's organisational history, conflict erupted. This conflict was not just over party structure in relation to the union link, form of membership and over the processes of selection, but over the very form, substance and argument of these narratives of Labour's history that emphasised the importance of adaptation to the Party's organisational health and success. Figures from the unions and the Party's left questioned whether reforming the Party's union link, membership structures and mechanisms for Leader election could really be reconciled with Labour's trade union past of which collectivism was an essential component. For outright opponents of change, the role of the trade unions in founding the Party took primacy and formed part of attempts to prevent the reforms Ed Miliband was proposing to the nature of Labour's links with its affiliates. While such attempts to resist change were unsuccessful, these divisions over Labour's past gave way to what became a wider normative contest over Ed Miliband's re-

characterisation of Labour's politics around the individual and the further erosion of the collectivist basis of Labour's organisational form.

### *Mandates from History*

At Labour Conference in 2012, Ed Miliband reached across the aisle and into an opposing historical tradition in order to try to claim the Conservative mantle of 'One Nation'. The intention of such a move was to mobilise in rhetoric a clear identity for Labour as the Party of the many, with unifying social democratic aims.<sup>23</sup> Mark Wickham-Jones has argued that, in so doing, Miliband's appropriation of One Nation as an overarching theme of policy also dipped significantly into ideas and discourses that developed during the process of 'modernisation' under Neil Kinnock and were also deployed under the premiership of Tony Blair.<sup>24</sup> Dimitri Batrouni has highlighted how, despite the promise of this 'One Nation' venture, the failure to have a clear, co-ordinated and unified sense of the purpose of this political project resulted in a missed opportunity for the Party.<sup>25</sup>

In 2012, Ed Miliband also made a symbolic return to the Durham Miners' Gala and became the first Labour Leader to do so since 1989. In this setting, surrounded by supporters of the trade union movement, he was happy to claim:

Trade unions founded the Labour Party. Our party is stronger because of the three million nurses, engineers and shop workers and all of the trade union levy payers who are part of our movement. That was true yesterday, it is true today and it will be true tomorrow as well.<sup>26</sup>

However, the events of Falkirk brought about a situation in which the Labour Leader now felt compelled to articulate different and more complex narratives about the relationship between the Party and its affiliated unions. In the face of political problems, and in a bold statement of his intentions after the eruption of the Falkirk selection incident, plans for reform were enveloped in the language of 'One Nation' politics. At the heart of these plans for political renewal were the package of reforms that arose from Falkirk. This

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<sup>23</sup> See Judi Atkins, 'Narrating One Nation: The Ideology and Rhetoric of the Miliband Labour Party', *Politics*, 35:1, 2015, pp. 19–31; John Gaffney and Amarjit Lahel, 'Political Performance and Leadership Persona: The UK Labour Party Conference of 2012', *Government and Opposition*, 48:4, 2013, pp. 481–505.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Wickham-Jones, 'The Modernising Antecedents and Historical Origins of One Nation Labour', *The Political Quarterly*, 84:3, 2013, pp. 321–29.

<sup>25</sup> Dimitri Batrouni, 'One Nation, Disconnected Party: The Evocation of One Nation Aimed to Unite the Nation, Instead it highlighted the Labour Party's Divisions', *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

<sup>26</sup> Ed Miliband, Speech to the Durham Miners' Gala, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2012.



engagement with Labour's intra-party politics and the politics of organisation gave rise to considerations of history that went beyond the Disraelian foundations of 'One Nation' and instead applied it more thoroughly to reconstructions of the history of the Labour Party itself.

The notion of 'One Nation' politics gave some continuity to party reform by placing it in a pre-existing narrative about the contemporary purpose of the Labour Party as a force for political change in government and policy. However, such an idea provided little by way of continuity when it came to the fundamental reform of union affiliation, membership structures and leadership election procedures within the context of Labour's history as an organisation. As a result, the summoning of Labour's own history to address present problems of organisation became a consistent theme of the way that the Falkirk Reforms were presented by those seeking to secure and implement change. In the run-up to his 'One Nation Politics' speech in St. Brides, Miliband sought to calm claims that he was intent on severing Labour's ties with the unions altogether, by stating that the selection incident showed Labour 'needs to mend, not end' its union links.<sup>27</sup> However, he drew on the very founding of the Party in order to underscore both the essential role of the trade unions and the need for the Party to adapt to present conditions:

One hundred and fourteen years ago, Thomas R Steels, a railway signalman from Doncaster, the town of my constituency, submitted a motion to the Trades Union Congress to found a Labour party. He did it because millions of working people across the country were fed up with an economy that didn't work for them, a legal system that repressed them and a society that was unequal and unfair. That's how the Labour party began.

Those are the values that have motivated our movement for more than a century. The founders of the Labour party addressed the world as it was, and so must we address the world as it is today.<sup>28</sup>

By drawing on a particular story from the Party's past, Miliband set out a historically-rooted logic for considering reform to party structures by emphasising the importance of Labour addressing the times in which it finds itself.

The final version of the Collins Review itself aimed explicitly to root proposed changes to Labour's affiliation and leadership election structures in a much wider and more extensive historical narrative about the foundations of the Party and its organisational journey. Indeed, in comparison to previous episodes of organisational change, the Collins

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<sup>27</sup> Ed Miliband, 'The Falkirk Scandal Shows that Labour Needs to Mend, Not End, Union Links', *The Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Review offered the most lengthy and developed historical narrative outlining acutely Labour reasons for addressing the problems of party organisation and how changes could be best designed to meet the world in which Labour found itself. The review charts how the founding structures of Labour once had real value. However:

...the builders of Labour's post-war organisation believed the new structures would evolve over time...in certain crucial respects Labour remained stuck in the past. The internal party structures established at the end of the First World War proved more enduring than its architects expected or intended.<sup>29</sup>

Alan Johnson wrote in *Progress Magazine* in similar terms that, 'as we commemorate the centenary of the start of the First World War, it is ironic that the Labour party is looking again at a structure that largely emerged from that period.'<sup>30</sup> Such versions of the past imbued proposals for reform, which were a substantial change to how the Party organised and related to its affiliates, with a historical precedence that was unquestionably Labour in nature. If Labour's founders, including trade unionists, had envisioned a party that would be adaptive as an institution across time then the Collins Review, its drivers and its contents were about living this history out. This historical logic was stressed at great length, despite the seeming unlikelihood of any major changes beyond the Refounding Labour package happening until the Falkirk incident broke.

Furthermore, despite Ed Miliband's reticence to accept nostalgic visions of the New Labour period as a leadership candidate in 2010, a more recent 'modernising' history of organisational reform and change in the Party's links with the trade unions became part of a constructed historical logic in 2013.<sup>31</sup> This logic supposed that the Falkirk reforms, despite being born out of pressing political necessities, were part of an evolutionary approach that was a well-established part of Labour thinking. As he described when first announcing his intention to seek reform:

A hundred years ago the trade unions helped found the Labour Party. Decade by decade, from Neil Kinnock to John Smith to Tony Blair, we have been changing that relationship. And in this new politics, we need to do more, not less, to make individual trade union members part of our party.<sup>32</sup>

A similar sense of the temporal roots of change were expressed in relation to the abandonment of Labour's Electoral College mechanism. Indeed, the Collins Review

<sup>29</sup> Ray Collins, 'Collins Review', p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Johnson, 'Putting Principles First', *Progress*, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014. Available at: <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2014/01/28/putting-principles-first/> (Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

<sup>31</sup> See Richard Jobson and Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Gripped by the Past: Nostalgia and the 2010 Labour Party Leadership Contest', *British Politics*, 5:4, 2010, pp. 525-48.

<sup>32</sup> Ed Miliband, One Nation Politics Speech, St. Brides, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

described how the introduction of wholly individual ballot for the leadership of the Party would result in ‘the final realisation of the OMOV process that was begun by John Smith thirty years ago.’<sup>33</sup> The rights of members as a whole were to be brought along this naturalised journey of reform.

In all of this, the ‘modernising’ logic of Labour’s history from years past remained a central feature in the narratives of change for a reforming Labour Leader and his supporters, even though the explicit use of the language of the ‘modern’ was not often used. Furthermore, unlike in years past, the challenge these reforms addressed was no longer couched in terms of a history of internal disquiet and electoral decline of the 1970s and early 1980s. This past, the difficult internal struggles it once signified, and the threat it supposedly presented to the conduct of an effective Labour government were slipping over the horizon. Other elements of Labour’s history, including both its political foundations and its ‘modernisation’ after 1983, provided ground within which these impromptu changes could be given greater continuity in Labour’s relationship with time by those pushing most strongly for change.

This narrative of an adaptive party, and reference to the ‘modernisation’ of previous decades, was an important part of the awkward temporal politics that Miliband and his supporters were grappling with in this period. On the one hand, the New Labour years, and the organisational ‘modernisation’ that underpinned them in the preceding decades, provided a set of logics that were readily available in the wake of a substantial disruption to the political settlement between Labour and its affiliated unions. In the face of a crisis, change to Labour’s organisational structures needed roots that retained, rather than abandoned entirely, the Party’s identity. These histories provided the justification for this and, as is outlined below, came with individualising logics that would continue to have real pertinence.

On the other hand, following to a letter the narratives of ‘modernisation’ and New Labour’s logics risked failing to draw a line between the Party Miliband led and the more recent past, or put forward any vision of change or recognition of what the Party’s defeat signalled about the health, value and actualities of the New Labour years. More broadly, this meant Miliband and his team were navigating an awkward balance between maintaining Labour’s historical identity, putting distance between Miliband’s Labour and

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<sup>33</sup> Ray Collins, ‘Collins Review’, p. 26.

the New Labour project, whilst resisting the urge to criticise New Labour in any way that delegitimised the Party, its mission or achievements as a whole. In the context of Labour's organisational politics in particular, notions of remaking Labour's politics as a 'movement' – albeit one of individuals – became the narrative through which Miliband and his closest supporters sought to overcome these tensions.

### *A Conservative Opposition*

In contrast to Miliband's telling of party history, figures from the unions and the Labour left drew different lessons from the past. Their narratives challenged the idea that Labour's history could be used to justify sweeping changes, as they sought to place limits on how far reform could go. Leading trade union figures responded to Miliband's wish to use the Falkirk Reforms as the initial justification to undertake a series of changes to the nature of the union link and party membership structures with familiar claims about the historical justification of trade unions in party affairs. In their uses of history, trade unionists found particular solace in emphasising their involvement in founding the Party itself. From this, figures from Labour's left and key union figures such as Len McCluskey and Paul Kenny of the GMB used narratives of Labour's roots to drastically different ends than Miliband and his supporters, in their attempt to draw red lines around the union link and reaffirm the right of trade unions to seek influence within the Party. Even once these key figures had consented to the precise form of changes through negotiations, they continued with these narratives.

Paul Kenny told delegates at a fringe event at Labour Conference in 2013 to 'be assured, the collective voices of millions of working people and their families, and 100 years of shared history, will not be washed away or sold for an election gimmick.'<sup>34</sup> Whilst for Miliband in particular Labour's history legitimised making change, those in the unions evoked Labour's foundations as a symbol of what should be a lasting and unbreakable continuity. Such claims about the shared history of the unions and the Party were often accompanied by the articulation of a sense of rightful ownership on the part of the unions. Len McCluskey told the same fringe meeting at Labour's 2013 Conference that 'it's our

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<sup>34</sup> Jason Beattie, 'Irate McCluskey Warns Miliband on Union Reform', *The Mirror*, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2013. pp. 6-7.

party. And by the way, no one, no one, is pushing us out of our party.’<sup>35</sup> Indeed, despite McCluskey’s key involvement in the making of reforms and his conviction that Unite could increase its influence through the new affiliation and leadership election process and Labour’s change in membership structure, Unite emphasised on the day of the Special Conference in 2014 that ‘Labour, remember, is OUR party. We – the trade unions - started it and this is a chance for six million ordinary men and women to really make their voices heard.’<sup>36</sup>

Others sought to use the past to confront the thrust of reforms in their entirety and to cast them well outside of changes within any identifiable Labour history or tradition. Billy Hayes, General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union, was a consistent opponent of changes to the nature of trade union affiliation to the Labour Party and the introduction of the opt-in. As General Secretary he refused to engage the Communication Workers Union (CWU) in the process of consultation on the reforms arising from the Falkirk Selection incident. He told listeners of the *Today* programme in the immediate aftermath of suggestions of the introduction of an opt-in by Ed Miliband that this was:

...a very old fashioned idea. It was introduced in 1927 by Stanley Baldwin in the trade disputes act. So we’ve had it before. And it was the 1945-51 Labour government that repealed that aspect about having to opt in. So it’s not a new idea it’s a very, very old idea and it was introduced to weaken the trade unions’ link with Labour so I don’t think it’s a good idea.<sup>37</sup>

Such an argument drew on history in order to attack proposals to introduce an opt-in for individual trade unionists in their own right. Not only was such an idea distinctly unmodern, it was an old idea with Tory roots. It was thus, he argued, well beyond what could be accepted within the Labour party and in the labour movement beyond it.

Those on Labour’s ‘hard left’ who had consistently opposed ‘modernisation’, voiced their concerns about the proposals to restructure Labour’s union link in similar terms. They presented the proposals for the introduction of an opt-in as part of a recent history in which the Party’s leadership had successively sought to sever these ties. Jeremy Corbyn, veteran left-wing MP and regular supporter of the CLPD’s attempts to ‘democratise the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Unite Q&A on What Next after the Collins Review’, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014. Available at: <http://www.unitetheunion.org/news/unite-qa-on-what-next-after-the-collins-review/> (Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

<sup>37</sup> *The Today Show*. BBC Radio 4, Radio Programme. 9<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

Party' described the scene at the Durham Miners' Gala and the way in which Ed Miliband appeared to have changed his position. He argued that:

Miliband conceded before he became Leader that unions were not a lobby group but an integral part of the Party. Things seem to have changed. Miliband's plan to make union members opt in to a union's political fund rather than having the right to opt out as at present is not just a nicety of words. It strikes fundamentally at the relationship between unions and the Party. The Labour right has always wanted to break the trade union link, especially since the New Labour clique took over, in order to present the Party as being acceptable to our critics in the Establishment. In other words, to make us respectable in the eyes of the ruling class, a "safe pair of hands" for managing capitalist Britain. The unique nature of direct trade union participation in the Labour Party means that Britain's biggest voluntary organisations, the trade unions, should be able to have a direct influence on policy. The leaders of all unions quite rightly make demands on Labour policy regarding the health service, wage legislation and public ownership.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Diane Abbott argued that maintaining a close relationship with the trade unions, in which they could exert collective influence over party decisions and provide financial support, was legitimate precisely because of the kind of movement history that others had attempted to propagate. In a debate with Alan Johnson on the issue, she described that such a relationship was legitimate precisely because 'it's the history of the movement. And that matters to people.'<sup>39</sup> Thus, figures like Corbyn and Abbott continued to voice the left's concerns about the degree to which shifting Labour's relations with the unions could hamper the Party in achieving genuinely socialist political goals.

So, while both Miliband and Ray Collins' narratives about the past focused on the intentions of Labour's founders and recent histories of 'modernisation' and adaptation, those opposed to the changes, and those in the union movement in particular, told a more conservative story about Labour's roots and the necessity of the continuation of union voices within the Party. These differing interpretations were part of debates about party identity that organisational questions provoked. These debates were particularly over questions of continuity. Could these changes really be justifiably described as 'Labour'? Ultimately, the Labour Leader was able to secure a package for change and do so in the name of Labour histories that made reforming part of what it had always meant to be the Labour Party. However, if these histories were about finding continuity for reform, a look to Labour's movement past provided cultural grounds for a more substantial reimagining of the Labour Party's identity as an organisation and its political practices. This shift was rooted not around a collectivist movement politics, but in the reimagining of Labour as a

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<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, 'Labour Mustn't Lose its Way', *The Morning Star*, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2013.

<sup>39</sup> *Channel 4 News*. Television Programme. 29<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

movement of individuals in line with the now substantially entrenched individualised conceptions of the Party's identity amongst its dominant elites.

### **Embedding the Retreat from Collectivism: Narratives of an Individualised Movement**

Whilst Miliband and his supporters narrated party histories that emphasised the need for the Party to remedy a temporal disjuncture, notions of movement politics from this past formed part of a more transformative story about the nature of the world surrounding the Labour Party and the form that movement politics should take in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ideas for this rethink had their genesis in the Refounding Labour reforms and a look towards Obama's community-organising model in the United States. While Labour's past movement politics had often been defined by collectivism, particularly by the Party's left, this particular use of the language of 'movement' extended further the logics of individualised party democracy and political coalition building from previous periods of change since 1983 and took them to even greater heights.

For Ed Miliband and those supporting change, Labour's movement foundations provided justification for altering the way the Party related to the unions, elected its leaders and included its members and supporters in a more elemental sense. Narratives of the decline of the mass party and ideas about the transformation of the way that people live and get involved in politics gave rise to a redefining of what a movement is and how it should function for the standard bearer of the British left. Changes to the union affiliation process aimed to engage union members on an individual level. This was pitched as the most transparent and democratic way for the Party to relate to trade unionists in a society increasingly described as a conglomeration of individuals rather than a ready-made collectivist political coalition. Labour's wider move towards a multi-speed categorisation of membership and a One Person One Vote leadership election system were justified through similar stories and described as essential to the fostering of a wider connectedness between Labour and British society giving legitimacy, electability and efficacy to the

Party.<sup>40</sup> Thus, whilst interpretations of the past provided a logic for change, the appropriation the language of movement politics provided the ideational grounding for the form of change. This rooted both culturally and logically the Party's transition towards increased openness and an individualised conception of membership and party democracy.

In the face of such a shift, opponents of reform – and trade unionists in particular – were keen to emphasise the historically *democratic* nature of collectivism and the collectivist political practices embedded in union affiliation. As such, profoundly different visions of party democracy and practices were often presented in the course of public comment, argument and debate. Grassroots groups on Labour's left were unwilling to accept the changes in their agreed form. Union leaders were largely willing to accept publicly, through Conference, the transformation of the form of the relationship as had been negotiated. However, few were willing to accept fundamental transformation to the meaning of the relationship and of trade union organising in the way that was presented by Miliband and others. Despite this resistance, the Labour Leader and his supporters were able to transform substantially the meaning of movement politics for Labour during this period.

The presentation and justification of the Falkirk reforms relied heavily upon the capacity of stories of movement politics to bridge the gaps between Labour's organisational identity and its history, and the changes that were made to party structures through negotiation between Miliband and the leading affiliated trade unionists. Whilst stories about One Nation politics and Labour's founding fathers were used to provide 'Labour' arguments for change, ideas of movement politics acted to describe more fundamentally the precise form that change should take. In such ideas, and in placing Labour within such narratives, the lexicon of 'movements' provided reforms with both a lineage entrenched within the historically rooted political practices of the Labour Party itself and a flexible enough idea within which substantial changes to Labour's organisational form could be housed. As Ray Collins put it in an interim report of his review into party organisation:

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<sup>40</sup> On multi-speed membership and its relationship with party organisation, see Susan Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilisation*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014). For a consideration of its manifestation in the Labour Party see Jessica Garland, 'A Wider Range of Friends: Multi-speed Organising during the 2015 Labour Leadership Contest', *Political Quarterly*, 87:1, 2016, pp. 23-30.



As we debate and make these changes we must not forget that we are, and always will be, the people's party. Our origins should not only be a source of continuing pride but also a guide to how we can build again for the future.<sup>41</sup>

Within these terms, the idea of rebuilding Labour as a 'movement' evoked a Labour past in which pride could be rightly held and a loose concept from which Labour's way forward could be mapped out.

In its apparent desire for the building of a new kind of politics, a new political coalition and party practices to match, the Falkirk Reforms contained within them clear ideational continuities with the Refounding Labour package. From the very outset of his candidacy for Leader, Ed Miliband articulated an interest in 'this idea of the movement, and whether you can combine a modern politics that has a movement that is representative.'<sup>42</sup> Refounding Labour, whilst coming to relatively little in terms of substantial structural changes in comparison to the Falkirk Reforms, echoed these interests. In the name of rebuilding the Party, Clause I of Labour's constitution had been changed from one that emphasised Labour's focus on securing victory at elections to broader a statement committing the Party to:

Bring together members and supporters who share its values to develop policies, make communities stronger through collective action and support, and promote the election of Labour Party representatives at all levels of the democratic process.<sup>43</sup>

In itself, the language of this change was important. It signalled an attempt to bridge the tensions that had clearly existed in the previous decades around whether it was right to understand Labour's political identity as one rooted in the politics or 'movement' or the primacy of parliament. Miliband and his supporters replaced a singular focus on election winning with a broader statement of its organisational mission. This combined the importance of achieving electoral victories with a renewed concentration on facilitating a community based politics that blended the activism and engagement of both members and supporters.

Whilst the package itself was secured in a far more muted form than had been headlined when Ed Miliband had first spoken of rebuilding a party with greater member involvement, and Obama-style community organising, these notions of a Labour movement rebirth came to dominate the way in which the Falkirk Reforms were later characterised. The Falkirk Reforms were presented by Ed Miliband, Ray Collins and

<sup>41</sup> Ray Collins, *Building a One Nation Labour Party: Interim Report*. (London, Labour Party, 2013). p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Tim Adams, 'When Politics is in the Blood', *The Observer*, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2010, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> *Labour Party Rule Book*. (London, Labour Party, 2013). p. 1.

other supporters as not just the logical extension of a reforming history, but a parallel logical extension of movement politics combined with a gradual individualisation of Labour's party practices.

Elite stories about party membership decline, the rise of movement politics and the decline of traditional ways of political action and engagement placed Labour in a far greater narrative of organisational change that went well beyond the immediate and acute political circumstances provoked by the Falkirk selection incident. The Collins Review described how 'put simply, the Labour Party, like all political parties, is faced with a politics and society radically different to that which existed when it was formed.'<sup>44</sup> It argued that declining party membership, class de-alignment and the erosion of strong party identification placed Labour in real need of adaptation. In response, the reforms to the union link, Leader election processes and the development of membership structure changes rooted in the Refounding Labour package were described as a programme of change 'that builds on the Party's historic foundations but responds to the world as it is today...to make Labour a movement that will change Britain for the better.'<sup>45</sup>

Ed Miliband himself emphasised the importance of such ideas of movement to Labour's ability to move forward in this new climate. At Labour Party Conference in 2013, he told delegates that:

Leaders matter, of course they do, leadership matters, but in the end political change happens because people make it happen. And you can't be a party that properly fights for working people unless you have working people at the core of your party, up and down this country. That is the point of my reforms. And I want to work with you to make them happen so that we can make ourselves a mass-membership party. Friends, let's make ourselves truly the people's party once again.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, in the run up to the approval of the changes to Labour's structure and union relationship he told *The Independent* that 'all of the big changes nationally and internationally happened because movements made them happen.'<sup>47</sup>

This signalled a move away from the ideas of defined central control that had been building and regularly articulated by 'modernisers' at times of party reform since the 1980s. It also played down the aims central to the *Partnership in Power* package in the

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<sup>44</sup> Ray Collins, 'The Collins Review', p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ed Miliband, Speech to Labour Party Conference, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Oliver Wright, 'Exclusive Ed Miliband Interview: I'll Return Politics to the People', *The Independent*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2014. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/exclusive-ed-miliband-interview-i-ll-return-politics-to-the-people-9145462.html> (Accessed: 7<sup>th</sup> May 2016).

late 1990s to foster a culture within which party members understood that their responsibility was limited and their outlook towards any Labour leadership should be one of respectful support and criticism only where necessary. Instead, the reforms to make Labour a 'One Nation' party drew on Labour's movement past in order to attempt to build a bottom-up politics making real change in communities across the country. In this respect, Ed told the TUC of his ambition to build 'a genuine living, breathing movement.'<sup>48</sup>

Notably though, this movement and its rebuilding was rooted in understandings of political action, legitimacy and democracy that focused on the role of the individual to a greater extent than had ever been the case within Labour's organisational politics. In launching his vision for a rebuilt Labour Party in the wake of the Falkirk incident, Ed Miliband described how:

...we live in a world where *individuals* rightly demand a voice. Where parties need to reach out far beyond their membership. And where our Party always looks like the diverse country we seek to serve. Representing the national interest. Building a better politics starts by building a party that is truly rooted in every community and every walk of life.'[emphasis added]<sup>49</sup>

For members of affiliated unions, this meant 'giving them a more transparent choice about their union's affiliation to Labour – and a choice whether to support the Party individually.'<sup>50</sup> In an extension of this, Miliband described how 'in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it just doesn't make sense for anyone to be affiliated to a political party unless they have chosen to do so.'<sup>51</sup> For the Party more widely, introducing multi-speed organising and substantially adjusting the union link meant building a Labour Party able to 'hear the voices of individual working people louder and clearer than ever before.'<sup>52</sup> Labour's turn to movement politics was part of a narrative with historical foundations. However, these foundations were turned to newly individualising ends in a political tradition that had once been dominated by collective participation and the solidarity of class-based politics.

It is worth recognising the importance of these narratives and their wider context when it comes to the continually shifting nature of class politics in the United Kingdom. The

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<sup>48</sup> Ed Miliband, Speech to the TUC, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Ed Miliband, 'One Nation Politics Speech'.

<sup>50</sup> Ray Collins, 'The Collins Review', p. 18.

<sup>51</sup> 'One Nation Politics Speech'.

<sup>52</sup> 'Ed Miliband Interview: We Put Your Questions to the Labour Leader', *The Independent*, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2013. Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ed-miliband-interview-we-put-your-questions-to-the-labour-leader-9003108.html> (Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> January 2017).

organisational basis of the Labour Party was slowly but gradually transformed by its elites after Foot's defeat in 1983, with their focus on individual politics, porousness and fluidity. This fluidity was tied to a vision of the wider world facing the Party as one in which class-based political activism and engagement was on the decline. Starting with political transformations under Thatcherism, and a consequently developed notion of the value of social democratic politics for the individual, narratives about individual politics and their organisational consequences developed gradually at the hands of 'modernising' elites.

Whilst it is possible to argue that such a shift was merely the acknowledgement of transformations in the *real* structural basis of British society, Evans and Tilley have argued that the potential of class-based politics declined because of an increasing unwillingness of politicians themselves to draw on such ideas.<sup>53</sup> Correspondingly, the focus of Labour elites on individuals, the varied nature of British society and the apparent need for structures that could respond to this contributed to wider discursive transformations. In this light, the decreasing legitimacy of collective politics followed a narrative logic that had gradually built over the decades since 1983 rather than pre-determined material transformations over which politicians had no control.

Thus, whilst reform was heavily informed by the Refounding Labour package, the turn to movement-based politics also bore the marks of years of reform that had gradually individualised Labour's political practices.<sup>54</sup> The narratives of movement politics and Labour's shifted world presented by Ed Miliband and Ray Collins reached into the past to justify movement politics. However, they constructed stories about the transformation of politics and society in order to advocate a One Nation party fundamentally different in its understanding of the composition of such movements.

Against this push for a new form of political movement comprised of individuals, opponents of reform amongst union leaders and left-wing grassroots organisations like the CLPD used stories about the democratic and collectivist nature of Labour's founding union voices to argue against change. For the CLPD this meant arguing against the form of change. Jon Lansman described how the entire package of reforms 'is presented as

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<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, 'How Parties Shape Class Politics: Explaining the Decline of the Class Basis of Party Support', *British Journal of Political Science*, 42:1, 2011, pp. 137-61; Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, *The New Politics of Class*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> See Jake Watts, 'The Lost World of the British Labour Party? Community, Infiltration and Disunity', *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

more democratic, but it isn't.'<sup>55</sup> The CLPD looked to defend the link throughout and continued to argue for the kind of 'democratic' member empowerment and bottom-up accountability it had consistently been seeking since its foundation in the 1973.

Other figures on the left of the Party echoed these sentiments and stressed the importance of collectivism to Labour's identity. Diane Abbott argued that 'it's the trade union link which gives the Labour Party its meaning' and that the Party needed 'to continue to have the trade union link and a collective voice for the unions at every level of the Party.'<sup>56</sup> John McDonnell said that the changes meant Labour was 'incrementally severing the Party's links with the trade union movement and, in effect, the organised working class'. For him, the likely result was 'that [socialists] find mobilising and direct action campaigning in the real world beyond narrow party structures are more effective methods of changing the world.'<sup>57</sup> Those on the left argued that Miliband's assault on collectivism would prevent Labour from achieving the real socialist political change it was supposed to be a vehicle for.

The left made these arguments but had little real influence over the outcome. Without clear and unequivocal backing from the trade unionists most closely involved in negotiating the changes, a power base on the NEC or a sympathetic leadership they were in a structurally weak position. Furthermore, as has been argued in previous chapters, it is worth noting that this erosion of the left's influence was also tied more directly to their successive failure to effectively articulate the value of their view of Labour's identity (and of its political mission more broadly) in a way that galvanised substantial popular support. In part, this was about the arguments they made themselves and their failure to build a distinctive temporal project in the wake of New Labour's defeat and in the face of substantial party reforms. Beyond this, they continued to operate in a wider political environment that remained hostile to the emphasis they placed on collectivist politics.

The result of the vote at the Special Conference was overwhelmingly in favour of the package that had been negotiated between Ed Miliband, Ray Collins and the key union players. However, the most involved and most significant figures from the trade unions attempted to resist the final package being wholly defined in the terms presented by the

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<sup>55</sup> Jon Lansman, 'The Collins Review', CLPD Yellow Pages Labour Special Conference, 2014, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> *Channel 4 News*. Television Programme. 29<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in promotion for Campaign for Socialism Rally in Scotland, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2015. Available at: <http://www.campaignforsocialism.org.uk/press-releases/2015/5/21/cfs-angered-at-labour-necs-decision-to-endorse-collins-proposals> (Accessed 9th August 2017).

Labour Leader himself. Their responses signalled what had become a wider series of contestations about not just the historical roots of the linkage but the ways in which this linkage should be understood and practiced.

In the autumn of 2013, Billy Hayes of the CWU signalled his intent to boycott the entire process of reform to members of the CLPD. He argued that the upcoming Special Conference:

is to become a rubber stamp for ending the effective, collective involvement of the trade unions in the Party. Precisely why this is so urgent has not been explained. A relationship that has endured for over a century surely warrants a more considered examination.<sup>58</sup>

For Hayes, the manner of the process and nature of the reforms being proposed ran against the grain of a relationship that had endured throughout the Party's history. Such a relationship, based on collective involvement, still had a real and credible contribution to make to the Labour Party and its political goals as he understood them.

Len McCluskey had been largely willing to accept the proposals being put forward by Ed Miliband, confident that the individual affiliation of union members and the individualisation of the involvement of union members in Labour leadership contest offered a real opportunity for Unite to increase its influence. However, in the aftermath of the reforms, McCluskey was clear in his assessment that Ed Miliband 'didn't understand collectivism.'<sup>59</sup> Soon after the Falkirk selection incident, he moved to assert the rights of Unite to seek the selection of a candidate it supports on the basis that it demonstrated their commitment 'to give our democracy back to ordinary working people.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed, at Labour's Special Conference he continued to assert the democratic right of unions to involve themselves in Labour Party's internal processes:

What this union has been doing is now what everyone says they want us to do, that is, encouraging our members to join the Labour Party, to take part in its democracy, to help make our parliamentary party more representative of our voters and the country as a whole. And, yes, to select Labour candidates who share our values. That's not a crime in a democracy.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Billy Hayes, 'Keep the Party Labour, Defend the Union Link', CLPD Campaign Briefing, Issue 77, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Len McCluskey, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Len McCluskey, 'I Urge Ed Miliband to Stop Playing into Wrecking Tories' Hands', *The Mirror*, 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013. Available at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/len-mccluskey-urge-ed-miliband-2033804> (15<sup>th</sup> August 2016).

<sup>61</sup> Len McCluskey, Speech to Labour Special Conference, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014.

Paul Kenny, then leader of the influential GMB union, took the same opportunity to articulate more forcefully the importance of union collectivism, and the notion that unions can legitimately participate as a collective body in the Labour Party. He argued:

Unions are collective bodies. That's what we are. We are a collective organisation, with a collective voice. And that collective voice, as we said right throughout this, is not for sale. Our affiliations, our Conference voice and our NEC voice is absolutely crucially important to ensure that that collective view of our members, up and down the country, all walks of life, is heard centrally to the Labour party. And that's not up for discussion.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, when it came to the commitment of unions to particular forms of change, the Falkirk reforms and their arguments about them were not, at least publically, explicitly explained in terms of union interests or the right of Labour's affiliates to 'control' the Party in any way. Instead, union leaders drew on symbolic articulations of practices underpinning the wider labour movement. Whilst narratives of democratic renewal and movement politics were appropriated by Ed Miliband and his supporters, union leaders – even those willing to accept some form of change – engaged forcefully in articulating narratives about Labour Party identity and the union link and the continued legitimacy of collectivist ways of political organising and mobilisation both within the Party and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

Despite his reticence to face down his party over his early attempt to 'Refound' Labour, after the eruption of the selection incident in Falkirk, Labour's Leader sought to alter substantially the structures of the union link, membership and Leader election procedures. What resulted was a party that was greatly altered in form. These new membership structures and leadership election procedures surely played directly into the rise of Corbynism after Miliband's resignation after Labour's defeat at the polls in 2015. However, the importance and effect of these changes was not just material.

Beyond the narratives charting the incident of the Falkirk selection crisis itself, the Party's elites shifted the temporal and cultural politics of Labour by telling new stories about the value of its movement past and the importance of individualisation. Miliband and his supporters argued that the continued survival of elements of Labour's historical structures

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<sup>62</sup> Sir Paul Kenny, Speech to Labour Special Conference, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2014.

meant organisational reform was required. This narrative emphasised a similar sense of temporal disjuncture between the Party and contemporary politics to that which the ‘modernisers’ had articulated in previous decades. Thus, Miliband’s push for reform arose from this foundation and the logics of ‘modernisation’ that had been at the forefront of arguments about organisational change since the leadership of Neil Kinnock. Through this language, change was given a sense of continuity and a firm place within Labour’s culture and history, particularly through evocations of the Party’s past and this more recent history of party reform.

However, most importantly, such ideas were accompanied by a historically grounded reimagining of Labour’s identity that revolved around the renovation of Labour’s movement politics for the modern age. Here, familiarly Labour ideas of movement, once emphasised more heavily by the ‘hard’ left, were transformed to accommodate the birth of a new movement. This movement was intended to accommodate and mobilise new ideas and new modalities of political engagement. In a clear break with the arguments of the left and their understandings of what a ‘movement’ would be for Labour, Miliband and his supporters argued that party membership decline and class de-alignment meant this movement, and the engagement of Labour’s affiliated trade unionists, should focus on individuals over and above collectivist political practices. In so doing, Labour’s elites continued to draw on stories about the decline of the potential of class politics and fed this into arguments about the Party’s organisational form.

In this vein, Ed Miliband continued in a long tradition of Labour Leaders in exploiting the terrain of the past to excavate the Party from the problems of the present. With this came a further extension of the individualising logics that had been established in previous episodes of organisational change. Thus, what was achieved in light of the Falkirk incident was not just a new party in structure but a new set of practices mapped on to a vision of the Labour Party as a conglomeration of individuals to an even greater extent than had previously been the case. These individuals were to be the basis of a new electoral coalition that would bring the Party back to government and allow it to affect real change in local communities. This was, in essence, an attempt to bridge the divide between notions of Labour as a movement and as a parliamentary force that had been a constant source of tension since the Party had lost the 1979 General Election.

Whilst the Miliband government that these reforms were designed to play a role in ushering in never came, this narrative shift had important consequences for Labour’s



organisational politics. These have become particularly apparent since the 2015 election. Firstly, the return of a clear ‘movement’ narrative under Miliband paved the way for Corbyn’s own vision of movement politics. Notions of ‘movement’ were an important part of Corbyn’s successful leadership campaign and the Corbynista vision of Labour’s intra-party politics and its relationship with parliament as a whole. Despite this, little has been done by the left to challenge the individualisation of the Party, an idea that appears – at least for now – strongly embedded in elite narratives of party organisation.

Secondly, whilst Miliband and his supporters had painted a picture of a party opening its arms to a ‘moderate’ coalition of individuals that would lead to its return to political ascendancy, the influx of a Corbyn-supporting selectorate in 2015 was far from what had been envisioned. This has created difficult tensions between notions of an open, engaged and diverse Labour on the one hand, and historically grounded tribal concerns about entryism from the left of the other. The consequence of this has been substantial internal disquiet.

## **9. Conclusion**

This thesis has examined how party elites have constructed and reconstructed visions of Labour's identity through narratives which emphasised the temporal aspects of the Party's cultural politics. This analysis was conducted in relation to major episodes of organisational reform covering processes of candidate selection, policy-making and party governance, membership structures, and the union link since 1979. Through the stories they told, the Party's elites put forward their interpretations of what Labour's past, present and future meant for its political practices and engagement in British politics. In particular, these narratives were used to make arguments about the relationship between Labour's organisation, proposed structural change, conceptions of the Party's relationship with history and time more broadly, and normative values like legitimacy and 'democracy'. These narratives marked out what were often divisive arguments about the Party's essence and what defined its politics in specific moments of its history. They have also been revised and redrafted through history, as different arguments were exercised by party elites, in changing political and social environments.

Between 1979 and 1981, the Bennite left reshaped the Party around extensive narratives of betrayal, which worked to emphasise the importance of making the PLP 'accountable' to the wider movement. Some party 'moderates' sought compromise, by accepting part of this view whilst continuing to assert the importance of parliamentary independence to Labour's past, present and future politics. However, for some on the right, this sharp turn towards a Labour identity defined by internal mechanisms of collectivist accountability marked the end of Labour's commitment to representative democracy and to Parliament. For the Gang of Four in particular, the Party had no future and Labour's commitment to the parliamentary road had come to a dead end. As far as the episodes of organisational change in this thesis go, this marked the high watermark of influence of collectivist ideas of accountability in the Labour Party.

Since this period, ideas amongst increasingly dominant party centrists about the relationship between what it meant for Labour to be 'modern', the downfall of collectivism and the increasing value of the individual to 'democratic' and 'legitimate' politics were progressively more central to the stories that they told. With the decline of the left, and under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, the narratives of organisational reform being constructed at the top of the Party changed dramatically. In particular, after the

Party's 1987 election defeat, elite narratives of 'modernisation' and histories that emphasised the importance of adaptation for Labour's political progress were used to instil the seemingly incontrovertible value of the extension of individual involvement and balloting. This marked the beginning of a reimagining of the Party's politics to which the individual became increasingly important. This shift occurred in a wider context of the discursive transformation of British politics, in which Thatcherism took aim at collective organising with the trade union movement and pursued vigorously a politics defined by individualism.

These notions of the relationship between the 'modern' and the legitimacy of individualised participation extended into the changes to the Party's union link after the General Election loss of 1992. In search of a 'modern' identity for the Party, its leading figures articulated a further rolling back of collectivist politics in their eradication of the block vote. Whilst some trade unionists and figures on the left opposed this shift and what they argued to be an erosion of Labour's historical roots, 'modernisation' and its accompanying individualisation took further hold.

From 1995, until the Party had returned to office in 1997, Labour's 'modernising' elites then cast a more critical eye on Labour's cultural politics, in their attempts to ready it for government through Partnership in Power. In this respect, the 'modern' and the temporal catch-up that dominant party elites from Labour's 'moderate' wings had narrated after the decline of the left was now tied to the importance of a respectful internal political culture of participation. This culminated in an attempt to reorient the Party away from myths of betrayal and defeat, and a subtle but important articulation of Labour's identity as a party committed to the supremacy of parliamentary politics, over and above the 'movement'.

Even when operating in complicated temporal terrain after the fall of New Labour, Ed Miliband transformed the Party with a similarly individualising focus, first gradually as a newly elected Labour Leader and then more dramatically in the face of a saga surrounding Unite's involvement in the selection of a parliamentary candidate in Falkirk. Whilst the explicit language of 'modernisation' was largely set aside, the Labour Leader and his supporters continued to evoke the organisational logic of the past articulated by Kinnock, Smith and Blair. Miliband and his supporters did this in the name of recovering a movement politics and rebuilding Labour as a party that brought a wide range of

individuals from difficult communities and backgrounds together in order to effect change. Consequently, Labour's elites now placed ideas about the value of the individual at the very heart of Labour's identity as a 'movement'. Within this, they also attempted to reconcile the dual 'movement' and parliamentary identities of the Party.

It is worthwhile considering how this narrative transformation can help us understand the politics of the Labour Party under Corbyn, and more broadly, and what this can tell us about Labour's politics and what wider lessons can be drawn about the relationship between, organisational change, party identity, and the temporal and cultural aspects of party politics. It is to these issues, in their respective order, which the remainder of this conclusion now turns.

### **The Rise of Corbynism, Party Organisation and Intra-Party Conflict**

Ed Miliband's reinvention of the Party's relationship with the trade unions and reform of its membership structures was supposed to form part of a wider series of shifts that would put him in Number 10. Despite raised hopes within the Party, positive looking opinion polls, and the expectation that the election would result in another hung parliament, Labour did not return to office. Instead, the 2015 General Election saw the Conservatives jettison their Liberal Democrat coalition partners and return to governing with their own majority.

Miliband's own penchant for a more radical politics combined clumsily with a drive to combat his 'Red Ed' image. Labour never managed to articulate effectively or persuasively the logic behind the series of shifts and compromises underpinning its electoral offer. The party awkwardly signalled a move to the left whilst simultaneously trying to defend the record of the last Labour government. It attempted to tackle prevailing economic orthodoxies whilst emphasising its commitment to cutting public expenditure and responsible government. And, issues like immigration and the continued rise of Scottish nationalism exposed uncertainty, and showed a party situated on ideological terrain that made responding strategically to cultural issues of the 'nation' particularly difficult. Furthermore, beyond these issues of platform, the drive to rebuild the Party in an individualised guise, in greater numbers and with strengthened links to an active and *moderate* political coalition were unsuccessful.

Whilst some anticipated this Labour defeat, few predicted the return of the Labour left that followed or the way in which Labour's organisational structures would enable this. Nobody anticipated this upsurge would be centred on such a marginalised figure as Jeremy Corbyn. Ed Miliband's decision to resign immediately after Labour's defeat left a vacancy at the top of the Party. In the leadership contest that followed, Corbyn vanquished Yvette Cooper, Andy Burnham and Liz Kendall and achieved 59.5% of votes overall in the first round of the ballot.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of this contest, and the first running of the Party's new leadership election system, Labour's membership grew astronomically. In the 2015 leadership contest, over 440,000 took part, either as members, registered supporters or affiliated supporters.<sup>2</sup> This went well beyond the number of members and supporters that had taken part in the preceding leadership election under the old Electoral College system. In July 2016, membership numbers peaked at 554,000.<sup>3</sup> Whilst current figures are slightly lower than this, this is no mean feat, particularly when considered against a wider backdrop of party membership decline in European democracies.<sup>4</sup> Despite this success, it would appear that the tensions surrounding the scheme that facilitated this rise may have seen the arrangements underlying this experiment diminished. Jessica Garland has written of Labour's move away from the full-blooded multi-speed membership structures that facilitated this growth, with the introduction of time limits for the involvement of members and supporters in leadership contests.<sup>5</sup>

However, to focus solely on the organisational features underpinning this upsurge in the popularity of the Labour left ignores the importance of Miliband's own 'movement' narrative to the revival of their fortunes. By articulating a return to an individualised conception of Labour's 'movement' past, Miliband and the Collins Reforms as a whole paved the way for the return of the Labour left's own 'movement' narrative. In the realm

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<sup>1</sup> See Rowena Mason, 'Labour Leadership: Jeremy Corbyn Elected with Huge Mandate', *The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/12/jeremy-corbyn-wins-labour-party-leadership-election> (Accessed 19th August 2017).

<sup>2</sup> 'Result of the Labour Leadership Elections 2017'. 12<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Available at: <http://www.labour.org.uk/blog/entry/results-of-the-labour-leadership-and-deputy-leadership-election> (Accessed 19th August 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Keen and Vyara Apostolova, 'Membership of UK Political Parties', Parliamentary Briefing Paper, 28<sup>th</sup> March 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke, 'Going, Going,...Gone?' The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 51:1, 2012, pp. 24-56.

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Garland, 'Labour's New Model Party', in Mark Perryman (ed.) *The Corbyn Effect*. (London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2017). pp. 68-80.

of party organisation in particular, Ed Miliband's narrative of a return to movement politics provided a bridge between a 'moderate' Labour politics that continued in its commitment to parliamentary democracy and a figure of the Labour left who, like his closest supporters, understands the relationship between the Labour Party and Parliament in different terms.

In the 2015 leadership contest itself, Corbyn frequently evoked the importance of returning the Party to its 'movement' roots. He told the *New Statesman*, a matter of days before his overwhelming victory, that he had put himself forward in the contest in order to 'rebuild the Party as the movement it needs to be.'<sup>6</sup> Shortly after his victory, he described how 'Tolpuddle reminds us of the roots of our movement' and that it was important 'to remake our party as a real social movement, organising and rooted in our communities.'<sup>7</sup> This notion of a movement politics, and the idea that he signified the very opposite of 'some all-knowing all-seeing celebrity who sends it [party policy] down the food chain' was an important mobilising feature of his campaign and his retention of support since his election.<sup>8</sup> Corbyn's taking-up of the 'movement' politics of Miliband has provided him an already present and newly respectable narrative through which to rally support and embed ideas about the relationship between the Labour Party and Parliament. These ideas endured within the Labour left, even though they remained side-lined during the New Labour years.

Corbyn's 'movement' narrative, in which activists and supporters hold greater authority, also played an important part in galvanising a growth in membership numbers. However, the rise in Labour's membership numbers that followed their General Election defeat in 2015 did not come at the time, nor with the political character, that Miliband and his closest allies had anticipated. This has had importance consequences for the cohesion of the Party.

Throughout the 2015 leadership contest and since, concerns about infiltration and entryism have once again surfaced within Labour. Figures from the Party's centre and right have been caught in a difficult situation. They had placed considerable emphasis on

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<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Corbyn, 'As Labour Leader, How I Will Unify MPs, Rebuild the Party and Win in 2020', *New Statesman*, 19<sup>th</sup> August 2015. Available at: <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/08/jeremy-corbyn-labour-leader-how-i-will-unify-mps-rebuild-party-and-win-2020> (Accessed 26th February 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Speech to Labour South West Conference. 21<sup>st</sup> November 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Wintour, 'Jeremy Corbyn: It's Time for a New Kind of Politics', *The Guardian*, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/sep/11/jeremy-corbyn-aims-to-throw-out-theatrical-abuse-in-parliament> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

organisational openness as a consequence of their downplaying of the political value of class politics. They expected that a diverse and ‘moderate’ coalition of members and supporters would be the result of this. But, the rise of the left and the advent of Momentum – an extra-party grassroots organisation that formed to get Jeremy Corbyn elected as Leader and continues to support him – has run in contradiction to this expectation. Consequently, this stress on the Party having a greater political porousness has combined awkwardly with a historically-rooted concern for drawing clear boundaries around the Party in order to head off the possibility of left-wing entryism. This had been combatted in the past through articulations of Labour’s identity as the political standard bearer of the (broadly conceived) working classes, right up to and including the excision of the Militant Tendency in the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Without a class and collectivist notion of Labour’s organisational borders, the Party’s centre and right have lost the clear sense of political community that is needed for them to make cogent arguments about why the involvement of Momentum and Corbyn’s most left-wing supporters in party affairs is inappropriate.

These uncertainties, alarm about Labour’s position in the polls, Corbyn’s low personal approval rating and anxiety about the efficacy of the Party’s communication strategy contributed to a period of substantial internal disquiet in the first year of Corbyn’s leadership. Corbyn’s refusal to resign in the summer of 2016, despite losing the support of the PLP in an overwhelming vote of no confidence and a leadership challenge, demonstrated the capacity of the Labour left to stretch these pre-existing narratives of ‘movement’ to accommodate their own never-ceasing emphasis on the importance of the voice of the grassroots and bottom-up accountability. Key figures from Corbyn’s team such as John McDonnell argued that Corbyn’s resistance was not about keeping one individual in post, it was ‘about democracy of the movement.’<sup>10</sup> The idea that the grassroots should come over and above Labour’s parliamentary wing was on display with greater consequences than ever before, used to justify keeping a leader in place who had lost the confidence of his MPs. A leader maintaining the confidence of their MPs is a basic precept of British parliamentary democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> Jake Watts, ‘The Lost World of the British Labour Party? Community, Infiltration and Disunity’, *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

<sup>10</sup> Anushka Asthana, Jessica Elgot and Rowena Mason, ‘Jeremy Corbyn to Face No-Confidence Vote as Labour Rebellion Builds’, *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/27/jeremy-corbyn-no-confidence-vote-labour-rebellion> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

Even after Corbyn had secured his position with the defeat of Owen Smith in the 2016 leadership election, allusions by figures like John McDonnell and Clive Lewis to the possibility that MPs on the right of the Party might be subject to deselections were wrapped up in similar stories about the primacy of Labour's grassroots. Left-wing MP Clive Lewis argued that proposals for deselection were really about a 'democratic choice for our members ... The whole process of deselection, you call it deselection, well the other word for it is actually a democratic election for your representative in parliament.'<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the rise of Labour's left, at least thus far, has done little to undo the embeddedness of the value of individual involvement and individual participation in Labour's organisational form. The logic of individualisation that has increasingly dominated narratives of organisational reform, first under Kinnock and Smith, then Blair and Miliband, has not yet been challenged. This, despite figures like Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott and John McDonnell all being at the forefront of arguing for a collectivist and class-based politics in the face of the proposals to reform the Party's union link under Miliband and before.<sup>12</sup>

When Corbyn and his supporters have spoken on organisational issues since 2015, they have not rejected outright ideas about the importance of individual members despite their emphasis on Labour's movement past and future. Certainly, the impact that Corbynism might have on Labour's organisational structures is yet to become clear. However, thus far, collectivism, and the narratives through which the left had consistently sought to justify it through the last 50 years, shows little sign of making a return. The real importance of the Labour left's vision of Labour's organisation going forward is yet to be seen and there have been signs that this individualisation might continue. Much has been made of the potential of developing Labour's internal processes in order to allow for direct consultation with individual members on policy issues. This 'digital democracy' has been hailed as a potential game-changer for Labour's practices by both figures close to Corbyn and the Deputy Leader Tom Watson.<sup>13</sup> Despite this, no changes have yet been

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Walker, Heather Stuart and Jessica Elgot, 'Corbyn Calls on Labour MPs to Recognise 'Thirst for Greater Democracy'', *The Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/19/jeremy-corbyn-calls-on-labour-mps-to-recognise-thirst-for-greater-democracy> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>12</sup> See pp. 196-7.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Boffey and Toby Helm, 'Corbyn to Give Members Power to Choose Shadow Team and Policies', *The Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/sep/17/jeremy-corbyn-labour-leadership-members-choose-shadow-team> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).



announced. The potential for members to elect the Shadow Cabinet has also been mooted and since appears to have been dropped.<sup>14</sup> These proposals have all been contested by figures on the Party's centre and right.

In addition, figures on the Labour left like Chris Williamson have cited increased choice for individual members as one reason behind the possible introduction of the 'McDonnell Amendment'. It was initially intended that such an amendment would allow any Labour MP to stand in a leadership contest with support of only 5% of the Party's parliamentarians.<sup>15</sup> Ruling out his own future candidacy for Leader, McDonnell defended both the debate about future nominations processes and retaining the existing OMOV leadership election system. He told Andrew Marr that 'I think our members don't want to go back to where there's just a small group deciding who is the Leader. They want a democratic say and I think that's the future. We're a democratic party now.'<sup>16</sup> More recently, he has indicated that, in the wake of a strengthened position for Corbyn, the Party's 2017 Annual Conference should focus on activism: 'rather than battles at Labour Party Conference over detailed constitutional amendments, it's more important to get this year a real discussion about how this party becomes a social movement.'<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, a compromise proposal was settled on in which the threshold for nominations was reduced to 10%.<sup>18</sup>

Corbyn and his supporters have done little thus far to challenge the assumptions of Miliband and his assertion that Labour's organisation was best understood as a movement of *individuals* in contemporary British politics. When it comes to the removal of the Electoral College and the changes to the Party's membership structure, there is little sign that the newly resurrected Labour left are putting forward a challenge to this

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<sup>14</sup> Emilio Casalichio and Kevin Schofield, 'Jeremy Corbyn Drops Bid to Allow Labour Members to Elect Shadow Cabinet', *Politics Home*, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2016. Available at: <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/labour-party/jeremy-corbyn/news/81063/jeremy-corbyn-drops-bid-allow-labour> (18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>15</sup> 'The McDonnell Amendment: Richard Angell vs. Chris Williamson', *Labour Vision*, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2017. Available at: <http://labourvision.org.uk/labour-vision/the-mcdonnell-amendment-richard-angell-vs-chris-williamson/> (18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>16</sup> *The Andrew Marr Show*. Television Programme. 5<sup>th</sup> March 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Heather Stuart and Rowena Mason, 'John McDonnell Hints at Deal on Labour Leadership Rule Changes', *The Guardian*, 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/aug/18/john-mcdonnell-hints-at-deal-on-labour-leadership-rule-changes> (Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Rajeev Syal and Jessica Elgot, 'Labour NEC Paves Way for Potential Leftwing Leadership Candidates' *The Guardian*, 19<sup>th</sup> September 2017. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/19/labour-nec-paves-way-for-potential-leftwing-leadership-candidates> (Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> September 2017).

individualisation of the Party. Corbyn's better-than-expected performance in the 2017 General Election has secured his position.<sup>19</sup> Despite this, how the Labour left plan to make use of this to transform Labour's identity is yet to become clear and, in the face of a precariously positioned Conservative minority government, may take time to emerge.

### **Labour's Fractured Organisational Politics**

Beyond the specific and developing organisational narratives of Corbynism, it is clear from the analysis within this thesis that the relationship between stories of Labour's past, present and future and its commitment to 'democracy' – however conceived – are the subject of considerable debate. The identity of the Labour Party as an organisation is plural, rather than homogenous, and situated in relation to time. This is true at the level of its political elites through time, between left and right, and between party and trade union. The political cultures that cohabit within Labour have evolved in their conceptions of party organisation during this period. And, even if particular ideas have dominated in the definition of organisational change, or similar points in history or styles of politics have formed common reference points, these political cultures and differing imaginings of Labour's identity have never merged into one. The stories through which Labour's elites, from left and right, have articulated their opposing visions of the Party's politics reveal divides that go beyond notions of 'power' and strike at the heart of tensions that continue to exist within Labour. This dynamic contributes to the continued affirmation of Ralph Miliband's claim that 'like Hobbes and fear, crisis and the Labour Party are twins'.<sup>20</sup> Labour's organisation has, for at least 40 years, been the home of counterposing elite narratives rather than unified ones.

Different sides have opposed each other not just through claims to their rightful empowerment or the distribution of power, but through what have often been starkly contrasting arguments about the meaning of the Party's past, the lessons that can be drawn from its history and the values that should be at the centre of its political practices going forward. All of Labour's organisational clashes, its internal strife and the debates about the way it performs its politics have been suspended in, and in relation to, time. Labour

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<sup>19</sup> Peter Dorey, 'Jeremy Corbyn Confounds his Critics: Explaining the Labour Party's Remarkable Resurgence in the 2017 Election', *British Politics*, 2017. Online First.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism*. (Merlin, London, 1972). p. 16.

elites have variously conceived of the Party as primarily as a ‘movement’ or as a parliamentary force, a historically adaptive party or one that needs to retain close links with its origins, as one rooted in collectivist politics or in its relationship to and facilitation of the individual member and supporter. These divisions, in the narratives that its elites have developed across its recent history, do not solely represent differences in normative values or what it means for Labour to be ‘democratic’; through their suspension in narrative they represent clashes of temporality. Given the endurance of these clashes, and their continuation, it is difficult to see how Labour’s splintered organisational politics could be brought together into a unified and enduringly settled form.

Fractures between these narratives continue to exist, and will likely characterise the organisational and internal politics of the Labour Party going forward. Jon Lawrence once wrote how ‘Labour activists have always had a strong sense of their party as a historic “movement”, which must know its past in order to envisage its future.’<sup>21</sup> However, when it comes to Labour’s elites since 1979, what it is to be a ‘movement’, or for Labour to ‘know’ its past, has been at the heart of its organisational contests.

When considering Labour’s political history and its relationship with class politics, Gareth Stedman-Jones emphasised how it was important to consider the Labour Party as a ‘number of discontinuous disjunctures’, rather than an object of historical continuity, stability and incessant linear forward progress.<sup>22</sup> If this is to be the case, then we are best placed to understand Labour’s organisational politics by acknowledging that Labour’s political identity and culture are not continuous, static or homogenous. Nor are ideas about its organisational structures hermetically sealed, divorced from the context in which the Party finds itself. It is hoped that, though this thesis has focused primarily on the Party’s elites, it has made some contribution towards such an understanding.

Labour’s organisational form has been, is now, and will – if recent years are anything to go by – continue to be, the subject of hotly contested debate. Considering how narratives about Labour’s organisational identity shifted and changed through history, even amongst its political elites, allows us to better understand the essence of these arguments. It

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<sup>21</sup> Jon Lawrence, ‘The Myths Labour Lives By’, in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.) *Labour’s First Century*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000). p. 342.

<sup>22</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies of Working Class History 1832-1982*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983). p. 243.

highlights the articulations of time that sit at the heart of its fractured, and often fractious, internal politics.

### **Organisational Change and Stories of Party Identity**

Beyond its focus on the intra-party politics of Labour, this thesis should serve as a demonstration that organisational change in political parties is not exempt from the ubiquity or importance of narratives. Telling stories is not incidental to politics; it is politics. It is a crucial part of change and, as demonstrated in the analysis presented here, essential to the articulation of different visions of a party's organisational identity.

Labour's narratives and its temporal and cultural politics have been explored substantially when it comes to party platform, yet hardly at all in relation to its organisational politics. Studies of contemporary party organisation have yet to catch up with the consequences of decades of new thinking about the relationship between language and politics and the importance of the ordering of events in arguments. The nature of politics requires that actors in political parties do more than make decisions, including when they are seeking organisational change. They must, as Alan Finlayson and others have highlighted, make argument.<sup>23</sup> These arguments can secure changes, set expectations, advocate for particular values, embed particular understandings of a party's history and circumstances, and stress specific normative values. The ordering of events by political actors is an important part of this process and narratives, and the temporality they impose, are a crucial part of the undertaking of organisational reform. Each of these elements can contribute to the redefinition and reinvention of a party's identity.

This thesis has demonstrated the effect and impact that these stories can have at moments of change in terms of party identity, party organisation and intra-party politics. In relation to each of these components, claims about the past, the workings of 'history', the conditions of the present and the possibilities of the future both impact and reflect the understandings of the Party's organisational structures and the way that its practices are defined. In many respects, this is a story that is particular to Labour and its distinctive temporal culture. However, similar questions could be asked of other parties, both within

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<sup>23</sup> See Alan Finlayson, 'From Beliefs to Argument: Interpretive Methodology and Rhetorical Political Analysis', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:4, 2007, pp. 545-63; James Martin, 'Situating Speech: A Rhetorical Approach to Political Strategy', *Political Studies*, 63:1, 2015, pp. 25-42.

Britain and elsewhere. Scholars within political science have tended to focus on organisational development *through* time, in a linear conception of the way that time works. However, there is much to be gained from wider consideration, in a variety of countries and contexts, of the implications of the temporal sequences that structure the narratives used by party elites for conceptions of organisational identity and party renewal.

In particular, the fact that electoral defeat and Corbyn's rise followed Miliband's vision of an individualised party rooted in untapped 'moderate' communities is one recent and pertinent example of the fragility of the organisational futures that are projected by politicians at times of reform. If the past provides a repertoire, or a familiar terrain, through which party elites can construct their diagnoses of the roots of a party's present situation and cement their solutions in a party's cultural fabric, the future of a party's organisation and the narratives that feed towards it, whilst often portrayed as certain and achievable, are further from reach and more clouded from view than they are ever presented. The future holds tantalising opportunities that parties constantly seek to imagine and grasp. But these possibilities, and the prospects of living out and embedding a new organisational identity, are uncertain and unpredictable. The consequences of change are anticipated, hoped for, but never quite known.

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### Interviews

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