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# A century of Labour

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Jon Cruddas (2024) *A Century of Labour*. Polity

The British Labour Party shares in the crisis of social democratic parties that seek election in liberal states with independent judiciaries, a free press, freedom of expression and association and the other bourgeois freedoms to which we in the West have long been accustomed. It is also a democratic socialist party that seeks upon this infrastructure of freedom to build a socialist society within the constraints of capitalism. Other parties pursuing this approach have been as influential as the LP in the modern histories of their countries but now face a battle for survival that some, like the once huge French and Italian Communist and socialist parties, have already lost. Even in power, as in Germany today, social democratic parties face corruption from within and competition from without that in the USA threatens to bring down with the Democrats the whole 'rules based international order' of US imperialism.

'Yet' in the UK the hundred year old Labour Party stands on the verge of sweeping electoral victory over a Conservative Party that has long departed from the traditional norms of governance and is now moving towards a version of the openly fascist Alternative fur Deutschland. How much of a bulwark can Labour offer against such populism and what can it contribute to the red-green alliance that must constitute the left of the future? Or will it merely hinder such progress? These are the questions which Jon Cruddas confronts as he traces 100 years of Labour and labourism. His finely crafted mapping of the internal dynamics of the

Party, together with its relations with the broader left that still depends upon it whilst sometimes contributing to it, thus clears the ground for acknowledging and overcoming the overall crisis of social democracy.

## Getting all its ducks in a row

'The book seeks to reassess Labour's history and the present condition of the party by returning to questions of justice. It explores the competing visions of how a just society should be organized and how these have defined a century of Labour. The argument of the book is that Labour's successes and failures can be understood in terms of its ability to unite and cohere three competing approaches to justice within an overall political organization and agenda for government.' (pp. x-xi)

To each of these three traditions in the Party, Cruddas poses questions of origin (where Labour came from), death (where it is going, if anywhere) and purpose (what it is for). In as broad a church as the LP is, and the Conservative Party was, there are different answers to these three questions from various adherents to the three visions of justice that Cruddas disentangles from the mush of sentimentality to which they are reduced in TGMOO (This Great Movement of Ours). The first of these, utilitarianism, seeks to maximise the welfare of the people and derives from Bentham and Mill. The second, freedom, goes back even further to the Levellers and the Diggers who lost out during the English Revolution. The third, virtue, retains

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Aristotle as its classical reference point but infused the early Labour Party via Ruskin and Morris. 'These early divisions that shaped the origins of Labour . . . also defined the history of Marxism and influenced the politics of the Labour left. On one side stands the historical materialism of the Second International. On the other, humanist reactions to contest 'scientific socialism' and rigid party domination in a bureaucratized, authoritarian politics.' (28) 'The argument is that these three traditions are vital resources for the Labour Party. Labour succeeds when it can draw them together, as happened under Attlee and Blair. It tends to fall, however when just one tradition, most often the centralizing utilitarian tradition, dominates the party.' (29)

Repeatedly, as now perhaps, adherents to one or another lineage of descent within the Party privilege their particular perspective to condemn their opponents as 'betrayers' of what they see as 'the cause', labelling them with reductive and essentialist epithets, such as 'Bliarite'. Readers who do this will see proof of Cruddas's 'Bliarism' in the quotation above and perhaps read no further. However, Cruddas's attitude to Blair is nuanced, despite describing him as successfully bringing together the three strands of justice that have shaped Labour - at least enough to win a landslide election in 1997 with two reducing margins of victory in general elections thereafter. Cruddas acknowledges achievements in Blair's first term yet sees him 'derailed' by Iraq, unlike Wilson who also achieved repeated though not so spectacular electoral success but resisted US pressure to join the war on Vietnam. Cruddas records Thatcher's remark that she considered Blair her greatest achievement because he turned Labour into a Thatcherite party by 'modernising' state services in the same way as she had privatised state-owned industries. Perhaps therefore Cruddas's assessment of success is limited to electoral success - another Labour trope used by one faction against another to press the party to the governing power without which nothing is achieved rather than go down to another 'glorious defeat'.

### Starmer

So, what is Cruddas's concluding assessment of Starmer? This is in the last of fifteen sections on each leader of Labour since Keir Hardie (though not the two women acting leaders - Margaret Beckett and Harriet Harman - twice), each illustrated with revealing photo-portraits. Despite his 'unusual background, having never been a political advisor and enjoying a successful career before entering politics' (224), Starmer's rise to the top was extraordinarily rapid - only five years

following election as an MP. 'He presented as an obvious leadership prospect from a mainstream liberal revisionist lane' (225). 'However' - a word with which the book is littered, as by synonyms for the same - 'yet', 'but', 'although' ('derailed' - above - is another favourite) - 'when the vacancy arose, Starmer shifted position' (ibid) and his 'political identity changed . . . reorienting his innate liberalism towards an explicit embrace of ethical socialism . . . Starmer would heal the breach between left and right . . . uniting the early ILP and the Fabians.' (226) 'But' (sic) 'he quickly shed the everyman persona he had used to ascend to the top of the party . . . deploying four key pivots, from his early commitment to internal pluralism, from his 10 campaign pledges, a return to the supply-side socialism of the early 1990s and a shift away from Labour's tradition of liberalism . . . overseeing a brutal centralization of power on strictly factional lines and the removal of any signs of independent thought from prospective Labour candidates' (229-30). This was widely apprehended as replacing his earlier 'Corbynism without Corbyn' with a New Labour restoration project.

'Yet' (again!), 'Starmer's journey could be read in a very different way': he was seeking to 're-establish the traditional class base of Labour politics' and 'win back the red-wall for Labour' with 'a supply-side approach focused on active state intervention to reengineer growth through ambitious public investment' (232). 'The wisdom of such a reorientation all depends on how successful it proves to be.' (235) To return to the concern about the future of social democracy within which this review has set its concern with the democratic socialist LP, economic growth currently looks an unlikely prospect. 'Stale technocratic social democracy will prove unable to resist the rise of authoritarian populism . . .'

'Yet' (!), as the book concludes, 'Labour is part of a rich radical tradition dating back to *Magna Carta*, the Peasants Revolt of 1381 and the Civil Wars. Its antecedents include those who embraced the religion of socialism and the pioneers who built the Labour alliance and later created the welfare state. Labour established five generations of equalities legislation and contributed to the international development of human rights. Labour has resources to draw on, traditions to excavate. Without such intellectual and political reconciliation, a party of labour could be destroyed by victory.' (246-7)

**Disclaimer:** The reviewer is not and never has been a member of the Labour Party.