

Britain's Labour Party cuddle up to US right

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16 April 2001

A recent meeting organised by The John Smith Institute has proved most illuminating on New Labour's attitude towards welfare reform. The subject matter of "Moral Sense" and the political outlook of the invited speakers suggest New Labour's erosion of civil rights and welfare provision will continue apace, should they be re-elected. The think tank takes its name from the late John Smith, leader of the Labour Party until his death in 1994. The acceleration of Labour's rightward trajectory is such that Smith, once considered to be on Labour's right, is nowadays hailed as a figure far to the left of Prime Minister Blair's cabinet.

The Smith Institute has a remit to provide the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, with policy ideas. Specifically to "look at issues which flow from the changing relationship between social values and economic imperatives". This is jargon for examining the incompatibility of welfare provision with the demands of global competitiveness.

Britain's public welfare provision was largely established in the immediate years following World War Two, a time when the nation state retained a certain limited autonomy from the world economy. This period also witnessed the nationalisation of certain industries and utilities. Funded by progressive rates of taxation on business and the public, these public services, like free education and health, ameliorated the worst excesses of the capitalist free market and in doing so ultimately helped preserve capitalist property relations from the threat of social revolution.

Now however, The Smith Institute is concerned that the destruction of public services is creating enormous inequalities in society, which government's can no longer ameliorate through welfare provision. The think tank has been charged with answering by what other means can government ensure social stability?

Labour's answer is indicated by its choice of the American criminologist James Q Wilson as its featured speaker. Wilson's academic work has an overtly authoritarian bent and he has a penchant for extreme American nationalism. He first rose to prominence during the Richard Nixon presidency as a co-author of the infamous Moynihan Report, which denounced welfare services and argued against the danger of "welfare dependency" in order to justify spending cuts. His profile continued to rise in the Reagan years, his studies of crime and single motherhood making him a prominent figurehead of the

American right.

Wilson's beliefs are similar to those of another influential American academic of the extreme right, Charles Murray. Both Wilson and Murray have co-authored books with the late Richard J. Herrnstein. Murray and Herrnstein published *The Bell Curve*, which sought to justify social and racial inequality as the necessary result of inherited differences in intelligence. Herrnstein and Wilson co-authored *Crime and Human Nature*, which rests on similar social Darwinist tenets.

Wilson's public profile has recently been raised by the policies promoted by the Mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani. Wilson's simplistic "Broken Windows Theory", first published in 1982, asserts that if someone breaks a window in a building and it is not quickly repaired, others will be emboldened to break more windows. Eventually, according to Wilson, the broken windows create a sense of disorder that attracts criminals who thrive upon conditions of public apathy and neglect. Consequently, Wilson believes, an attitude of "zero tolerance" should be adopted for minor law infringements to prevent a wholesale descent into lawlessness. The adoption of "zero tolerance" policing methods by the New York Police Department has resulted in the widespread harassment and even death of working class and minority youths and adults in the city. Most recently NYPD officers shot Malcolm Ferguson and Amoudo Diallo dead in, separate, execution type killings.

The Smith Institute audience included Rabbi Sacks, from the British Jewish Council, David Young, former adviser to the Conservative Thatcher government and now a Tory peer, Gary McDowell, the Republican director of the Institute of United States Studies and Irwin Stelzer an American consultant close to Rupert Murdoch—owner of media corporation News International. Also present were several Labour MPs, and assorted members of the British liberal establishment epitomised by representatives of the *Guardian* newspaper, including the journalist Hugo Young. David Miliband, head of the prime minister's policy unit, attended on behalf of Tony Blair.

The seminar was conducted amidst an ecclesiastic fervour, reminiscent of an American style prayer breakfast. Wilson told the audience that future moral revival should involve locking up single mothers in institutions to ensure their young are taught virtue.

Wilson had addressed the incarceration of single parents in his acceptance for the Francis Boyer Award in 1997. Previous winners of this award include Henry Kissinger, Robert Bork, Antonin Scalia and Ronald Reagan. In his speech entitled “Two Nations”, Wilson evoked Benjamin Disraeli, British prime minister in 1868 and 1874, who famously warned that huge wealth inequalities would undermine parliamentary rule with possible revolutionary consequences. In contrast, Wilson said that the US was divided into two nations by morality or lack of it. He also congratulated the state of Massachusetts and their Teen Living Program, which houses teenage parents in enclosed facilities.

Wilson's views on illegitimacy are similar to Charles Murray's, for whom it is the best indicator of an emerging “underclass”. Unlike divorce or widowhood, the growing numbers of children born out of marriage is a special problem, argues Murray, and illegitimacy rates above 50 percent in some inner city areas are a “unique departure from human history”. According to Murray, the entire experience of humanity has seen marriage as the desirable framework for raising children and rightly applied stigma to those who step outside these righteous morals.

Similarly, Wilson made repeated references in his contribution to the Smith seminar on the way moral decline is related to the growth of single parenthood—a direct cause of crime, he claimed. Wilson told Gordon Brown, whose own father was a minister of religion, that society's capacity to make moral judgements has been eroded. Religious reawakening was needed to strengthen people's innate disposition to distinguish right from wrong.

Rabbi Sacks, for his part in the debate, concurred that markets and governments could not by themselves attend to people's needs. Improving spiritual health was the job of the “third sector”, encompassing families, small groups and religious groups.

According to the *Guardian's* Hugo Young, Brown seemed “undismayed” by the backwardness of Wilson's analysis. Indeed Brown spoke reverentially of Wilson as a massive authority, whose works he has read with much profit. Wilson's message that modern social ills can be cured only by a revival of individual morality is in keeping with intermittent claims made by Brown and other members of the Blair cabinet, like David Blunkett, that what Britain requires is a return to “Victorian Values”. Wilson's proclamation of a supposed innate human morality, a faculty which he claims welfare has done much to destroy, is perfectly in tune with the evangelical tone of Blair's policy speeches.

Regardless of the many similarities between the political outlook and academic writings of Wilson and Murray, the Labour government's attitude towards the two couldn't be more different. Wilson advises the Chancellor of the Exchequer and is received into the very bosom of the New Labour establishment, while Murray is ostracised or at least kept at

arms length.

How is this to be explained? Although Murray is closely associated with the previous Tory government's attacks on welfare, this is unlikely to put off a Prime Minister who has expressed his own admiration for Thatcher's policies on numerous occasions.

Wilson's advantage for Labour is that he has not become associated with overt racism like Murray. Last year at a debate organised by the *Sunday Times*, Home Secretary Jack Straw publicly denounced Murray's use of the term underclass and the racist views expressed in *The Bell Curve*. This was despite the fact that government members routinely use the epithet “underclass”, or a variant of it such as the ‘socially excluded’, to describe the most impoverished elements of the working class. Indeed views similar to Murray's permeate the present government's every utterance on social policy.

What Straw was seeking to conceal is that Labour is fishing for inspiration in the same ideological toxic soup of American social policy as the Conservative Party. Recently Tory leader William Hague and Blair have been eulogising about the church, faith based charities and voluntary organisations as the best method of delivering welfare. The continuing denigration of state welfare provision is justified by calls for self-reliance, civic responsibility and the role of voluntary associations.

Young, the only journalist in the British press to report the recent Wilson and Brown lovefest, cynically defended it by claiming, “Wilson's theories offer an escape hatch for politicians who have been fought to a standstill by problems of human behaviour they've been unable to master”. Here the statement made by Ronald Reagan in justifying his efforts to dismantle the US welfare in the 1980s springs to mind. Reagan referred to Lyndon Johnson's “Great Society” welfare initiatives, saying, “We waged a war on poverty and poverty won”.

In reality, poverty and inequality are not problem's of human behaviour, but conditions created by the inequalities of capitalist social relations. Having abandoned the limited reformist measures it once defended, Labour is dishing out a right-wing gruel based on moralistic and religious nostrums in an attempt to absolve the Blair government of responsibility for the social ills this has created.



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