

What does Britain's "Blue Labour" represent?

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Last week, Labour policy coordinator Liam Byrne delivered a report on the progress of the party's "largest ever listening exercise...designed to reconnect Labour and the public".

The report was delivered in private to leading Labour parliamentarians.

Based on 20,000 submissions, and "70 listening events", Byrne claimed that the "public" wanted stringent law-and-order measures, cuts in welfare and a curb on immigration.

"Submissions have expressed a sense that people have responsibilities as well as rights", he said, adding that a "significant proportion of people respond to being asked about international policy by expressing the view that 'we should be helping our own people first, particularly in time of economic difficulty'".

Labour must take on board such concerns, Byrne insisted, in formulating party policy.

Precisely who it is Labour has been "listening" to is not known, but strangely, in contrast to every opinion poll, the crisis in the National Health Service doesn't appear to have rated a mention.

In any case, Byrne acknowledged that the "vast majority" of those interviewed spoke of the "unfairness of the bankers' bonuses" and of their concern for "the future of young people", especially over rising tuition fees, and cuts in youth service funding. One thing is for certain: none of these concerns will find expression when Labour conducts its policy review. Its listening exercise is a sham, aimed solely at legitimising a predetermined shift to the right.

Byrne claimed, "The first priority for Labour this year is to get back in touch with voters—whose trust we lost at the last election; it was practically a 1983 result. Sixty percent of voters say that Labour was seriously out of touch".

What does the analogy with 1983 represent in Labour-speak? The general election manifesto produced that year—restating Labour's traditional commitment to nationalisation, economic regulation and mildly redistributive measures—is routinely derided as the "longest suicide note in history".

Labour's defeat—which much of the party leadership and the trade union bureaucracy welcomed—became the occasion for an offensive by the right wing to finally disassociate the party from the working class. It was followed by Labour and the Trades Union Congress abandoning the miners' during the 1984-85 strike, accepting anti-union laws and scabbing, culminating in the repudiation of the party's reformist policies and its embrace of the

"free market" under Tony Blair.

Throughout its 13 years in office beginning in 1997, Labour acted as the political servant of the financial oligarchy until the policies of rampant speculation and criminal accounting blew up in the financial crash of 2008.

Byrne's reference to 1983 is intended to suggest that Labour today is in need of a similar overhaul. But having refashioned itself as a right-wing bourgeois party more than two decades ago, where does it intend to go now in response to the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s?

An indication is given by the discussions taking place over "Blue Labour", a project pioneered by the academic Maurice Glasman.

Labour leader Ed Miliband has written a gushing introduction to the Blue Labour ebook, "The Labour tradition and the politics of paradox". Based on seminars held in London and Oxford involving "politicians and intellectuals", its contributors include Labour figures such as David Miliband, James Purnell, Jon Cruddas and Hazel Blears.

Miliband wrote that the book's aim is to explore "issues around the way in which our excessive dependence on financial services, and the broader historical dominance of the City of London in our economy, needs to be challenged".

It does nothing of the sort. To the extent that there is any critique of capitalism, it is solely of finance capital. Glasman states, "Socialism is a condition of sustainable capitalism, in that universities, schools, libraries, vocational institutions, the rule of law and democracy, all provide public goods that are necessary for its flourishing and growth".

His thesis is both turgid and false. To give just one example: he describes the Labour Party as the child of a "cross-class marriage" with "Dad" representing the trade unions, mutual societies and cooperatives and "Mum" the Fabian Society, and those intellectuals and others planning for government.

Glasman spends some time explaining how the marriage broke down, and why it was "Mum's" fault. The main point of all of this is Glasman's attack on the "state-driven, redistribution-driven, equality-driven Labour tradition that comes straight out of 1945".

The Labour government of that year created a bureaucratic statism, Glasman complains, and with it came a "loss of responsibility".

That Glasman should target the one period in history in which Labour was forced to make inroads against the major corporations and introduce welfare reforms—measures, moreover, that ensured it

broad support in the working class for an extended period of time—is indicative of the class thrust of Blue Labour.

His indictment of Labour’s “statism” has nothing to do with opposing its assault on democratic rights and championing of militarism and war, much less its support for class exploitation. He is decrying any the notion that the state should infringe upon the dominance of the capitalist market. The only role of government should be to smooth over, where possible, social antagonisms that arise, due to the excesses of this or that employer or group of workers. Glasman’s favoured model for achieving this goal is the German system of works councils, where employers and the trade unions collude in the suppression of industrial conflict.

He has praised the “early Blair days” of New Labour, when “there was very strong language about family, there was a very strong commitment to what he [Blair] called Christian socialism, there was a very strong discourse on responsibility and the work ethic...”.

Blue Labour, Glasman argues, is “an attempt to improve and strengthen the early days of New Labour.... It is the place where New Labour needs to go next”.

Where Blair went wrong for Glasman was his support for “globalisation”, which led to the “commodification of human beings”. Most importantly for the Blue Labour thesis, this enabled an “influx of immigrants”, creating resentment amongst the “white working class” that was compounded by the policies of “multiculturalism”. The end result was to undermine social cohesion.

Blue Labour intends to remedy this, he states. “The blue refers to the centrality of family life, a recognition of the importance of faith, a real commitment to the work ethic, a very casual but nonetheless profound patriotism that people feel about England”.

Blue Labour’s agenda has been summarised as “Flag, faith and family”. Glasman recently argued for “engagement” with the English Defence League and for the involvement of “people who support the EDL within our party”.

Labour’s turn to policies associated with the ultra-right has nothing to do with “listening to the public”. It has long been in fruition.

In 2004, for example, David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect* magazine, penned an article for the *Guardian* in which he queried whether an ethnically diverse society was compatible with the welfare state. “To put it bluntly, most of us prefer our own kind”, he wrote.

The *Economist* commented at the time, “The interesting thing is that connections between immigration and social dislocation have been made, and not just by men in jackboots”.

This was combined with a sustained campaign by Cruddas, Byrne and others to claim that the rise in the vote for the British National Party in certain areas was the result of the legitimate grievances of “white workers” angered by immigration.

In 2007, Byrne, then Labour’s immigration minister, wrote a pamphlet, “Rethinking Immigration and integration,” arguing that immigration was harming Britain’s poor and unsettling the country.

In claiming that immigration was responsible for undermining “social cohesion”, the intention was to divert attention from the

massive increase in social inequality as a result of Labour’s policies. This deception has become even more critical since 2008, under conditions in which the nation’s coffers have been plundered in order to fund bailouts, bonuses and other subventions to the super-rich.

Blue Labour’s attack on “statism” serves to justify the policies of austerity, including the privatisation of what remains of the public sector. With its emphasis on friendly societies and “localism”, it is Labour’s equivalent of the Conservatives’ “Big Society” plans to dismantle health care, education and other essential social provisions.

This turn by Labour in Britain is part of a European-wide phenomenon.

In 2007 Byrne co-authored an article with Jeoren Dijsselbloem, the Dutch Labour Party’s home affairs spokesperson. Their demand that immigrants be made to undergo language and cultural tests was of a piece with the deliberate incitement of anti-Muslim chauvinism, under conditions in which both countries were involved in subjugating the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

In January this year, the UK think tank Policy Network (headed by former UK First Secretary of State and New Labour architect Peter Mandelson), the Wiardi Beckman Stichting (think tank for Dutch social democracy), and their German counterparts, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Das Progressive Zentrum, met in Berlin.

It produced a series of essays published as “Exploring the cultural challenges to social democracy”. The report asserted, “Popular concerns over culture, migration and identity are of considerable importance to the future of European social democracy; their neglect marks a significant weakness and vulnerability”.

In his contribution, Rene Cuperus of Wiardi Beckman Stifting, complained of the “paradox of Europe’s Holocaust trauma”, whereby “Intellectual discourse has for too long been characterised by a species of political correctness that praises multiculturalism and ‘The Foreigner’ as enriching for society, while turning a blind eye to the de facto segregation and marginalisation of many new immigrants and the stress they place on the welfare state in many nations. Also, the potential cultural conflict between Europe’s liberal-permissive societies and orthodox Islam was denied”.

This is the background against which the German Social Democratic Party refused to expel Thilo Sarrazin for his deliberately provocative anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim pronouncements. In the face of rising class antagonisms, not just Labour, but the whole of European social democracy is coming forward as the advocate of right-wing populism and nationalism.



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