Environmental Politics, the New Left and the New Social Democracy

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In Britain for most of the last two decades, programmatic renewal in the Labour party has been associated with the defeat and marginalisation of the left. This local experience has perhaps made us particularly receptive to theories which connect the eclipse of socialist and social democratic values with secular forces of social and economic change working at national, European or even global level. An impression develops that 'modernisation' is synonymous with the defeat of the left. I will suggest here—with special reference to environmental politics—that such impressions are misleading. In some social democratic parties programmatic renewal bears the imprint of the left—both of the 'old' social democratic left and of the 'new left' which emerged in the late 1960s. Indeed, I will show that the latter was in some ways the engine of both programmatic renewal and the revitalisation of social democracy.

Post-materialism and the left

It was Ronald Inglehart who announced in the 1970s that a transition from materialist to post-materialist values was taking place in the most affluent societies as generations brought up in the relatively gilded era after the war shifted their political concerns to 'quality of life' issues, while conventional preoccupations with economic growth, class and statism became less salient. Sustained affluence had seemingly promoted an individualistic concern for self-actualisation and the growth of expressive values at the expense of the old left's collectivism and materialism. This, at any rate, was how Inglehart theorised survey evidence initially gathered in 1970 and 1971—evidence that was apparently buttressed by later trawls of opinion conducted in 1979, 1981 and 1983.3 The visible fracturing of the left during these years added credence to Inglehart's analysis.

In Britain during the 1980s post-materialism was politically invisible and there was no new left political formation challenging the Labour party for votes. New left ideas could be found on the Labour left, but so could many old left ideas. The sense that old Labour was out of kilter with the age was strongly reinforced by the Conservative party's electoral dominance at a time when it championed policies and values very repugnant to its main rival. This sense of old Labour's obsolescence was reinforced intellectually in many ways. The influential 'New Times' thesis, for example, made the case for an 'epochal shift' in society founded on fundamental changes in social and political structures. While this thesis foresaw, inter alia, 'a profound ecological crisis' developing in the 1990s, it also stressed that the old left was unlikely to respond creatively because it rested 'upon a world . . . last disintegrating beneath its feet.' Indeed, the perception that social democracy was facing some sort of general crisis gathered strength in the 1980s, and several variants of this argument pointed to evidence of divisions and contradictions within the left, as well as ideologically assault from the right.

Kitschelt's wide-ranging analyses of west European social democratic parties, for example, stressed the social and occupational transformations underpinning the clash of new left values with those of old social democracy, which he reformulated as the challenge of a 'left-libertarian communitarian vision' set against traditional 'collectivist statist' values. In Britain, however, the left-libertarian communitarian vision failed to materialise as an alternative to collectivist statist values. Though elements of both new left and old social democratic values could be found within the Labour party, the strongest proponents of both were to be found on the left rather than in different wings or layers of the organisation. Britain's perennial economic problems ensured, however, that the left was preoccupied by an Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) until the party's defeat at the general election of 1983. Environmentalist ideas had a very low priority and this remained the case throughout the 1980s as the AES was discarded and the party leadership turned to embrace 'the market'. Labour's relative lack of interest in environmental issues during the 1970s and 1980s has been explained as a function of 'the party's roots in the organised labour movement and its reliance on support from the urban working class [which] provided powerful constraints against the adoption of a comprehensive environmental programme. Among Labour's traditional supporters and financiers the environment has been regarded, at best, as an irrelevance and, at worst, as detrimental to growth and employment.' In this view, then, the forces associated with social democracy stood in the way of progress on the environment. But with the transition to New Labour (so the argument goes) the way was cleared for progressive change in this crucial area. The environment apparently supplied perfect credentials for inclusion as part of the so-called 'third way' agenda pre-cisely because it 'is not easily located on a left/right ideological spectrum.'4 We could add that any 'modernisation' worth the name would have to come up with some serious thinking on this front.

But while Labour's 1997 manifesto asserted that environmental policy is 'not an add-on extra, but informs the whole of government, from housing and energy policy through to global warming and international agreements', we still await the first major environmental bill and there is much in government policy to discourage environmentalists. I will return to Labour's basic policies later in this article. But first let us acknowledge at least part of the preceding argument: that a very real clash of values occurred when environmental issues first became salient within social democratic parties. Moreover, it must be admitted that if a pattern was to be observed it tended to involve the younger, university-educated, middle-class activists demanding priority for the environment, while the older, working-class members—often represented by their unions or their parliamentary leaders—stressed jobs and economic growth. Such was the apparent intransigence of this recurring collision that some commentators doubted Inglehart's view that the materialist and post-materialist left could co-exist in the same organisation, while others incautiously concluded that working-class parties were now 'in all likelihood on their way out'.

Red and green in Europe

The unfolding drama was by no means confined to West Germany, where the largest Green electoral challenge to social democratic adventurism emerged in 1983 when Die Grünen broke through the 5 per cent threshold for representation in the Bundestag. In Sweden the social democrats (SAP) lost governmental power for the first time in forty-four years in 1976 largely because of their pro-nuclear energy policy. The same issue divided
the Austrian socialists when the country’s first nuclear reactor was ready to go on stream at Zwettendorf in 1978. While the union federation OGB supported the nuclear project as strongly as Bruno Kreisky, the SPÖ leader, young leftists inside the party strongly opposed it. Kreisky subsequently lost a referendum on this issue and green ideas made advances both within and outside the social democratic party organisations. The rift between trade unionists and environmentalists surfaced again in 1984 when the SPD was divided over the construction of a hydro-electric power station on the Danube which threatened one of Europe’s last remaining wetlands. Meanwhile in Sweden the SAP moved towards the abolition of nuclear power stations and the Greens surmounted the 4 per cent threshold for elections to the Riksdag in 1988. In 1990 the SAP’s conference agreed not to enter negotiations with the other established parties on the decommissioning of the existing power stations. Once again, however, it was found that the party youth, together with the organisation’s female and middle-class members, were keener environmentalists than the blue-collar unions in the LO con federation, which were more enthusiastic about jobs. The same pattern recurred in the controversies surrounding the proposed construction of a rail bridge linking Sweden and Denmark.

It was also visible in West Germany, where the SPD was divided over nuclear energy in the 1970s. The party leader, Helmut Schmidt, supported by the bulk of the parliamentary party and the DGB unions, backed its development—stressing jobs and economic growth—while the youth section, the Juso, together with a rather disparate left which straddled the party and the new social movements, was increasingly opposed.

But the SPD quickly demonstrated that it could adapt to the new situation. Soon after the SPD government fell in 1982 the party began to adopt elements of the new environmental agenda which the Greens brought into national focus when they secured a parliamentary presence the following year. The party congress at Essen in 1984 voted to begin the development of a new basic programme, seen by Willy Brandt, who was personally committed to winning back the SPD’s ‘lost children’. The programme commission sought a new synthesis centred on the idea of ‘qualitative economic growth’—an attempt to reconcile economic activity with environmentalism. The party became increasingly anti-nuclear, it stressed the need to end the arms race, it promoted gender equality and began to discuss North-South issues. All prominent themes of the Greens’ politics.

Some commentators claim in the light of all this that the SPD was transformed ‘in the course of the 1980s into something fundamentally different than it was before’. In my own view this is misleading, but there is no doubt that the SPD, in common with other social democratic parties in northern Europe, saw the necessity of assimilating Green ideas. What I want to draw attention to here is that the greening of the SPD basic policy programme—the new one was adopted in December 1989—took place alongside a reaffirmation of old social democratic values which were actually given a more radical expression in the new statement of values than had been the case thirty years earlier at Bad Godesberg. This green-red alignment was not confined to the SPD. A similar process was evident in the programmatic renewal of the Swedish SAP; and if we examine the most recent programme of the Norwegian Labour Party (DNA), the same pattern is evident there too. The British Labour party, by contrast, emerged from the 1970s and 1980s as preoccupied with conventional economic thinking as it had been twenty years earlier. Through the journey it had taken it from an ‘alternative economic strategy’ to reconciliation with ‘the market’ and an anxiety about whether the voters believed that the economy would be ‘safe in its hands’. Confined to opposition throughout the 1980s, Labour showed little interest in environmental issues until the Green party shocked the established parties by securing almost 15 per cent of the vote in the 1989 European elections. The Green threat was contained with the assistance of the first past-the-post electoral system, ensuring that the Labour party—unlike most of its continental counterparts—faced no effective electoral challenge to its left for either the parliament at Westminster or the one oscillating between Strasbourg and Brussels. It did face, however, a seemingly hegemonic Conservative party wedded to neo-liberalism, and Labour’s macro-economic policy was adapted accordingly, with ‘Old Labour’ values the casualty of the transition.

By contrast Labour’s policy review process—which hastened the party’s reconciliation to key aspects of the Thatcher settlement—was riddled with the SPD’s contemporaneous basic programme were infused with both anti-capitalist and environmentalist values, and though the former were watered down in the final version, the finished document suggests that the party was moving in a different direction from British Labour. (The first draft even talked of the need for a new social and economic order that would break ‘the power of capital over working people’). The final text was concerned with the power of ‘international capital’ exerting downward pressure on wages, working conditions, social and welfare provision, and environmental standards. It wanted ‘national and international control mechanisms’ to ensure that international capital does not withdraw from its social and ecological responsibilities and tax obligations and demanded common standards on social and environmental policy across the EU. Ecological restructuring, the programme declared, has become a matter of survival’, and ‘the preservation of nature must become a mission for all areas of policy’. The programme recognised that the affluent nations had done most to destroy the natural bases of existence and ‘must bear the main responsibility . . . for [their] restoration’.

The marks of the ‘New Politics’ were as obvious in the new programme of the Swedish SAP (adopted in 1990) as they were in that of the SPD. The Swedish party also argued that economic development since the industrial revolution had been achieved ‘at the cost of plundering the environment and short-sightedly exploiting nature’ with consequences that ‘threaten to undermine the very foundations of human existence’, not least because of the ‘worldwide unrest’ which grotesque global inequalities were said to portend. But the SAP programme was even more unambiguously than the SPD’s in identifying the regulated, private profit motive and unregulated market forces as the principal causes of both growing inequalities and environmental destruction. It restated the party’s aim of achieving a classless society, and also identified the public sector as the principal instrument for this purpose. In similar ‘old labour’ terms the party, having considered arguments stressing non-class cleavages in society, concluded that the new divisions, such as those based on knowledge and education, ran alongside and actually reinforced—rather than displaced—the materialist divisions of old. Yet the party also placed environmental progress on a par with the achievement of full employment, and introducing the idea of a ‘Green GDP’, it insisted that ecological requirements would inform all areas of policy.

The close links between the unions and the social democrats proved unable to prevent the ‘greening’ of the social democratic programme in Germany and Sweden—or, for that matter, in Denmark, Norway and Austria. Though the relationship between trade unions and social
of social democracy the trade unions have
recognised the primacy of the electoral struggle and acknowledged the dominant
role of party leaders in formulating policy. On the basis of the programmatic
exchanges that have actually taken place in northern Europe, one might conclude
from these generalisations that an adaptation to the green agenda is perceived to
be electorally expedient in these countries. Only around 5 per cent of voters
support the green parties in western Europe (which incidentally is not persuasive
evidence that socio-economic change is not engendering electoral and party political
upheaval); the biggest of these parties in electoral terms are to be found in
Germany, Sweden and Austria, while in Denmark and Norway (in common also
with Germany and Sweden) the social democrats are faced with electoral rivals
to their left espousing red-green policies.

Is 'ecological modernisation' possible?

It might be objected that the adaptations referred to are only verbal—rhetorical
and programmatic—and, as we implied about the British Labour party's 1997
manifesto declaration at the beginning of this article, it is one thing to declare
the centrality of environmentalism in a party programme, quite another to act
upon this precept. Moreover, talk of 'sustainable development' is intrinsically un-
convincing to those who believe that any economic development is environmentally
destructive. One might expect particular reactions within the green parties
to take this view. Anthony Giddens, the most prominent academic supporter of
British Labour's 'third way', is similarly sceptical about social democracy's 'eco-
logical modernisation', arguing that 'it isn't really convincing to suppose that
environmental protection and economic development fit together comfortably'.
Giddens is also one of those who believe

that the Greens 'pose ideological ques-
tions that are impossible to ignore, and
that place in question some of the basic
orientations of social democracy'. He is
also of the view that most social demo-
cratic parties are split on this issue,
which he sees as a consequence of being
in a halfway house where old ideas
remain prominent and no fully fledged
alternative has been formed."

But we have seen that the parties of social democracy that have moved furth-
ern to embrace the green agenda include
those which by the standards of New
Labour are most decidedly old social
democratic in their programmatic
language of class, equality, state intervention
and the critique of unfettered capitalism.
It is unwise to dismiss either the red or
the green passages in their programmes
as mere rhetoric, for these are countries
with the highest environmental standards
in practice, as well as the most generous welfare provisions and the strongest
corporate influence in parliament.

Far from constituting a special problem for the new social movements and 'post-
materialist' values, social democracy and its allies such as the trade unions may
lay claim to be among their first ports of call and sources of hope. The new
left began to enter the social democratic parties after 1968. In West Germany the
SPD was the first stop in the 'long march' through the institutions' which radicals
such as Rudi Dutschke recommended to
young activists, many of whom joined the
party and its youth section in the 1970s.
Since the late 1980s, Germany also
provides numerous examples of red-
green pacts and coalitions at regional
level; the inclusion of Die Grünen/Bündi-
nis 90—under the 'realist' leadership
of Joschka Fischer—in the current Schröder
government is a particularly poignant example of their history of collaboration, bearing in mind the government's support for the bombing of Kosovo and Serbia in April 1999. That a party with its roots in the peace movement could come to such a pass is proof of its dependency on the social democrats in its quest for influence over policy. In the process of adopting this orientation, Green fundamentalists had to be defeated within Die Grünen, many subsequently resigning from the party.

The German Greens remain essentially a party of the left, and the same is true in Sweden. Like those red-green parties with electoral clout which exist in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands, all of these parties are more likely to seek collaboration with the social democrats than with the latter's conservative and liberal rivals. Though Kitchell and Giddens question whether old social democratic values can be reconciled with those of the new social movements, it is a matter of fact that parties to the left of the social democrats with a tradition of militant espousal of socialist ideas, such as the former Communists in Sweden, transformed themselves under the impact of the new social movements ahead of the social democrats. The impact of the new social movements on the social democratic parties could be equally dramatic, as in the Netherlands, where the Labour Party, PvdA, was taken over by the new left in the early 1970s. But it was usually a case of new left activists and ideas joining forces with, and helping to change, the existing social democratic left, as occurred in West Germany, Austria and Norway. This is hardly surprising given the elective affinities of the young middle-class left in the late 1960s (feminists, pacifists, anti-racists, democrats). In Sweden, for example, no political party did more for the cause of women's equality than the SAP—in the promotion of female employment, for example, the expansion of public childcare centres and the provision of parental leave—and this was something feminists were bound to take into account as the SAP and the blue-collar trade union federation (LO) gradually feminised their own ranks, as did their counterparts in Germany, Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands.

British Labour was influenced by the new politics at around the same time as its sister parties—during the 1970s—and, as in the other cases, it was primarily young, university-educated activists drawn into the left of the party who first took up the new agenda. Moreover, it was not only the constituency activists who were attracted to recognisably new left themes. Tony Benn announced his own conversion to the new politics in 1970, when he identified it with alienation from existing power relationships and the call for more participatory forms of democracy.11 Trade union 'barons' such as Hugh Scanlon and Jack Jones actively supported the campaign for industrial democracy. Benn himself championed the cause and became associated with industrial cooperatives, constitutional reform of the Labour party, democratisation of the media, curbs on prime ministerial patronage and greater transparency in central government—just the sort of 'expressive values' which Inglehart associated with the post-materialist left. The trade union block votes were increasingly mobilised to support unilateral nuclear disarmament in the 1970s. Few issues were closer to the pulse of the new social movements than this, especially when NATO took the decision to site cruise missiles in western Europe and a 'second Cold War' got underway in 1980.

But the Bennite left also favoured an Alternative Economic Strategy, which we have seen, and this contained numerous centralising features that could not easily be reconciled with the call for greater democracy. Environmental progress, moreover, was never central to its political occupations. When, however, the AES was discredited in the course of 1983–7, a Labour left concerned with the issues of the new social movements continued to prosper for a while, particularly at local government level. Then, after its electoral defeat in 1987, the Labour party disengaged itself from such currents, with which the popular press anathematised as creatures of the 'loony left'. Modernisation of the party, through the mechanism of the policy review, was increasingly linked to an appeal to 'middle England': a euphemism for Conservative voters. To press forward a 'new social movement' agenda was now apparently to link the party with the sort of 'bizarre' minority issues whose avoidance was recommended by influential advisers to the leadership such as Philip Gould.12 Activists concerned with such issues were accordingly demobilised and many resigned from the party. The steep decline in membership figures between 1987 and 1994 certainly suggests so, as does the considerable turnover of membership thereafter.

My argument, then, is that the Labour left of the 1970s and 1980s contained both advocates of the old social democratic values—equality, economic growth, state intervention, public expenditure and planning—as well as proponents of post-materialist values. Interest in environmental issues was never uppermost among this Labour left, though whether it could have become so must remain moot. However, the dominance in British politics of conventional economic ideology—and even the crudity of vulgar materialism—can hardly be doubted. Labour's prolonged rapprochement with Thatcherite economic orthodoxy actually led to the marginalisation of both old social democratic values and those of the new social movements, along with their advocates. New Labour emerged from this process in 1994 as a proponent of market forces and globalisation. In numerous speeches to decision-makers at home and abroad, Tony Blair and his Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown emphasised their support for the entrepreneurial approach to flexible labour markets of the American economy and for 'education not regulation, skills and technology, not costs on business, and open competition, not protectionism'. They made clear their opposition to 'Eurocratia' and their perception that the 'European social model' stood in need of urgent reform. Welfare systems, in this view, generally needed reform to curb spiralling costs, while 'old-style tax and spend' was no longer an option. There was 'no right or left politics in economic management', Blair told the French Assembly in March 1998, just 'good and bad'.

New Labour's acceptance of the essentials of the post-Thatcher political economy was repeated in leadership speeches from Japan to Singapore, from Rupert Murdoch's News Corp Leadership Conference to the City of London and the New York Chamber of Commerce before the French Assembly and on the occasion of British assumption of the Presidency of the European Council. Labour had not only cleared out that sprawling, incoherent, 'Bennite' left which stood in the way of 'modernisation', it had modified in such a way as to deter the recruitment of a 'post-materialist' left. It talked of 'enhancing the dynamism of the market rather than of curbing it, and the process repudiated or played down those instruments of policy which appeal to continental social democrats and red-green parties alike: tougher regulations, punitive taxes on polluters, curbs on corporate tax evaders, progressive taxation, stricter health and safety standards, bigger employer contributions, and other state interventions at regional, national and transnational levels. Of course, in theory there are other ways of securing environmental progress. But does the Labour party seriously expect to develop one that is compatible with 'enhancing the dynamism of the market'?
New Labour and Social Exclusion

MELISSA BENN

The most common charge made against New Labour is that it represents an inevitably unsuccessful attempt to please all of the people all of the time—and that at some point New Labour will have to make up its mind about the extent of its true commitment to radical change. It is a question of whether the government will be able to bring together the necessary political consensus and conservative of its belief in market forces and family stability while at the same time seeking to reach for the moral high ground of radical change and perpetuating the ‘newness’ in politics.

But the centre surely cannot hold? As Darren Lawrence, mother of the murdered teenager Stephen Lawrence, and a quietly powerful national symbol, recently argued of the government’s record on race and reform of the police: ‘They want to implement changes but they want to please middle England as well.’ Similarly, the debate over repeal of Section 28 reveals New Labour to be in an unprecedented muddle concerning family values; is this the party of tradition and marriage, or so many church leaders and right-wingers have urged it to be? Or is it the party of personal postmodernity, promoting contingency and responsible pluralism in private life?

It is on the fundamental issue of poverty and social justice that New Labour's policies are most covertly contradictory. On the face of it, this seems an odd charge to make. After all, here is a government rhetorically passionate about the provision of opportunity for all its citizens. Since its election in May 1997 it has introduced an impressive array of anti-poverty measures including the

New Deal in employment, a comprehensive strategy for neighbourhood and community renewal, Health and Education Zones, the Sure Start programme designed to support deprived babies and young children, the National Child Care Strategy, tax credits and the national minimum wage. This is also the first government ever to create a unit specifically dedicated to tackling the problem of ‘social exclusion’. Since its establishment in December 1997, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) has produced reports on truancy and exclusion from school, rough sleeping, teenage pregnancy, 16-18-year-olds who are not in school, jobs or training, the accessibility of information technology and, most recently, neighbourhood renewal. To many government insiders, the SEU is the jewel in Labour’s policy crown, its favoured administrative son.

On the other hand, the radical promise of that sunny May morning over three years ago has long since faded. There is little public sense that we live in a society of profoundly changed ethics and values, of greater fairness or economic or social equality. The decision by Barclays Bank to pay its Group Chief Executive Matthew Barrett a bonus worth millions in the same week that over 100 supposedly unprofitable rural branches were closed down conjures up Thatcherite images of a society out of balance with itself. Similarly, BMW’s decision to withdraw, almost overnight, from one of the biggest car-making plants in Britain at Longbridge in the West Midlands sparked a widespread sense of outrage and hopelessness at the arbitrary power of international capital, a hopelessness