
VIEWPOINT

The Soul Searching Within New Labour

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I am extremely grateful to the Durham University Professor and the Member of Parliament for the City of Durham (Tim Blackman & Roberta Blackman-Woods, 2007) for their response to my viewpoint on *'Inequalities in Britain 1997-2006: the dream that turned pear-shaped'* (Dorling, 2006). Far too little has been written from those still inside of the government, and its political party, that helps explain why this current government has acted and continues to act as it does. Tim and Roberta's words, and the passion behind them help, I think, to reveal why government does what it does, believes what it believes, especially in the face of alternative evidence, and helps explain how it can soldier on under great pressure.

Let us start with what the Labour dream was. For me it was best expressed in the 1994 report of the Commission on Social Justice. That report summarised the state of the nation at the time as being shameful in comparison to the social achievements of our European neighbours, and most importantly in terms of our aspirations, in terms of what we could be. It 'shames us all' were the words I remember and the report set the terms of the debate for what could be better. That debate then underlay so many of the promises to reduce inequalities that were made by people who subsequently became Labour ministers (and Prime Ministers). It is sobering to read a copy of the report today and to think just how easy it would be to replicate it now: to write something just as damaging.

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The report's concerns were wide ranging, from concentrated worklessness, to miserable dental health provision and widespread child poverty. Surely we would not feature at the bottom of an OECD league table by child poverty measures a decade after Labour gained power? Sadly we did, even trailing the USA (UniCEF, 2007). What was achieved has not with hindsight begun seriously to deliver the social justice and much else that we (then, in 1994) dreamed of.¹

A key criticism Tim and Roberta have was that I am too downbeat, not celebrating Labour successes, and that I might lack balance. I have to admit to being guilty of lack of balance in the past. I have a poor track record. With colleagues elsewhere I have listed 17,948 things that have 'got better' under Labour (Dorling *et al.* 2002) and I did not find one that had become worse. I am sure this is a record. Has any other academic found so much to be celebrated? Would the great and the good spot my sycophancy? Sadly, New Year after New Year passed with no honours coming my way. True, my colleagues and I had pointed out that some keen Labour Party worker had slightly manipulated a few of the statistics that might not have been so positive to achieve this 17,948 for Labour – 0 facts against – statistical record. But we did not accuse them of forgery, 'merely the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another' (Orwell, 1949). The almost 18,000 Labour achievements were sadly not quite solving what the Social Justice Commission had complained about. But perhaps that Commission was misguided – am I not ignoring other achievements?

Here is one example of the kind of thing Tim and Roberta thought I should have mentioned, although they suggest first that they would be happy to refute my complaints on any of an infinite number of criteria (such is their party loyalty):

...On any criteria this is a substantial change and it has been clearly perceived as such among the general population. In 1994, three years before the Conservatives were defeated in the 1997 general election, 21 per cent of households were finding it difficult or very difficult to manage on their income, and only 29 per cent were 'living comfortably' (ONS, 2006).

¹ It is a crumb of comfort that Labour spin doctors early in 1997 did not ruin the song of this name, made famous in the 1996 film *Trainspotting*, the lyrics of which begin: 'when the taking and the giving starts to get too much'. Although cynicism in the 1990s was rife, the idea that how we were living was wrong was widespread, from high to popular culture, from the pages of Social Justice Commission *Tomes* to the cinema advertisements, including that for the film just mentioned, a film many more than two thirds could then afford to see:

Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television, Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing sprit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pishing you last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you have spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life... (<http://www.generationterrorists.com/quotes/trainspotting.html>).

Table 1. Change in poverty and wealth by political complexion of parliamentary constituency: in comparison to shadow cabinet constituencies (set at 100%)

Constituencies grouped by the political post held by the MP elected for each seat immediately after the 1997 General Election:	Cabinet Minister (%)	Government Minister (non-cabinet) (%)	Government Backbench (%)	Non-Tory Opposition (Lib Dem/PC/SNP) (%)	Conservative Backbench (%)	Conservative Shadow Cabinet (%)
Breadline poor latest estimates (2001)	201	178	133	127	103	100
Breadline poor 1991 estimates	197	173	127	125	101	100
Asset wealthy latest estimates (2001)	22	26	61	84	107	100
Asset wealthy 1991 estimates	29	39	76	94	119	100

Source: Derived from figures present in Dorling *et al.* 2007.

Note all rates are shown in relation to the life chances of the constituents of those areas represented by members of the Shadow Cabinet elected in 1997. In comparison to them, and in the latest period, voters represented by other Conservative MPs are 3 per cent more likely to be living in poverty whereas those represented by Labour Cabinet Ministers are now just more than twice as likely to be living in poverty as compared to their shadow Cabinet counterparts. Similarly the voters that elected the Members of Parliament that became Labour Cabinet Ministers have seen their relative chances of being wealthy fall from 29 per cent to 22 per cent of those of Conservative Shadow Cabinet Ministers. These statistics rely on census data so cannot be updated easily. However, simpler statistics showing similar results (but on an annual basis) can be derived from trends in life expectancy (rising most quickly for folk in Conservative constituencies) and for changes in housing prices and estimates of equity based on those. On average, those who already had most in 1997 have gained the most since 1997, and the more they had to begin with the more they have gained in terms of the years they can expect to live to and assets they can expect to acquire. Figures released on August 23 by the Office of National Statistics show inequalities in health life expectancy between small areas which are far wider than any yet reported in Britain: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdffdir/health0807.pdf>

By 2004, after seven years of Labour in power, only 14 per cent of households were finding it difficult or very difficult to manage, and 40 per cent now regarded themselves as living comfortably. (Blackman & Blackman-Woods, 2007, p. 119)

I have to admit that this was news to me, and good news at that. For a breakdown of who may have benefitted most from any increase in comfort see Table 1, but also beware what is meant by 'comfort' and 'difficulty'. Fortunately the publication they refer to can be accessed free and on-line (ONS, 2006) so I searched it for the word 'difficulty'. The word appears 15 times in Social Trends 36. The proportions of older people are reported who have difficulty with daily activity or mobility; of children who have difficulty in learning: specific, moderate, severe learning difficulties, or profound and multiple, behavioural, emotional and social learning difficulties; difficulties in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills and in understanding concepts (ONS, 2006, p. 37); difficulties in accessing NHS dental care (a fifth of parents of 5–8 years olds in 2003; ONS, 2006, p. 127); difficulty in taking part in activities like going to the cinema because of finding time (48 per cent) or cost (34 per cent, ONS, 2006, p. 194). How could a third of people have problems with the cost of going to the cinema but not say that they were having financial difficulties in general? Almost everyone used to be able to go to the cinema.

Eventually I found the source of Tim and Roberta's optimism that things had got better in terms of 'difficulty to manage'. Compare the text in the source below with the quote above and note that all this excludes the largest group of respondents (to the British Social Attitudes Survey) who merely state that they are 'coping' in every year surveyed:

The proportion of respondents who said that they were 'living comfortably' rose from 24 per cent in 1986 to a peak of 44 per cent in 2003, but fell back to 40 per cent in 2004. In contrast, the proportion who were finding it difficult or very difficult to manage fell from 26 per cent in 1986 to 14 per cent in 2004. This is of course not necessarily inconsistent with a widening of the distribution – as Figure 5.13 showed, the 90th, 50th (median) and 10th percentiles [of real disposable household income] have moved apart, but each has increased in real terms. (ONS, 2006, p. 78)

Household income has increased in real terms even for the poorest. However, expectations of what constitutes a basic living and the occasional respite, like the price of cinema tickets, rise a little faster when inequalities grow.

The proportions of people who cannot afford holidays, or cannot afford to make regular savings are far higher than those reporting that they are 'finding it difficult or very difficult to manage' (Dorling *et al.*, 2007). Managing is thus an existence worse than 'getting by' and having one holiday a year (not at a relative's home). Managing is: the rising debts not getting too high; living with poor and broken furniture; not spending money on yourself week on week; not inviting people in because you are ashamed; being overcrowded; finding it hard to give the kids the money for

the school trip.² Managing is not living properly. Managing is not quite getting by: mustn't grumble – it could be worse. And it should not be beyond the imagination of a Labour Member of Parliament and a University Professor to grasp this. All they need do is to imagine living on a quarter of their current income, or much less.

Tim and Roberta are nice people and they want things to get better. The Labour Party Worker who ensured that all 17,948 statistics improved on the Party website was, and I'm sure still is, a nice person who wanted (and I hope still wants) things to get better. But, in contrast, even Margaret Thatcher (who was an unpleasant person) wanted things to get better. That is why, in 1985, she committed Britain to reducing inequalities in health by the year 2000. They widened by more than they were supposed to fall. Margaret thought what she was doing would narrow such inequalities. *Wanting things to get better is not enough.* And wanting inequalities to be lower does not distinguish the current government from that of Margaret Thatcher.

I could go through the rest of their statistics (I really could, I am that tedious) but I doubt you'd read on. Instead I will reiterate that it is the key inequalities in wealth, health, poverty, education (at the ages that now matter most) and in housing access that are getting worse year on year. See the original viewpoint for these; none have improved since it was written (Dorling, 2006). Yes, there are other gaps which are narrowing, but all too often these are ones that were narrowing before the Labour party came to power, or ones that could be expected to narrow as the best-off can no longer gain more than they have already, or ones concerning issues that are now no longer key. Yes things could have been far worse under a hypothetically callous alternative, but that wasn't electorally likely immediately after 1997. So what has got better? Here are five things that have but which were not, to my knowledge on pledge cards:

- (1) The suicide rate has continued to fall year on year from its peak in 1998 to a new low in 2004 (ONS, 2007). It is the case that suicides tend to fall under Labour administrations, and it is good news that this government is no exception, at least on this count. However, since I claimed that 'the dream went pear-shaped' health inequalities between areas have risen again to a new extreme (Dorling 2007a). Health inequalities between people grouped by social class rather than area, in contrast, were reported to have fallen in new figures released from the Longitudinal Study in November 2007 by ONS.
- (2) The unemployment rate has fallen to an unprecedented low. True. And that is partly why our suicide rate has fallen, although suicide rates tend to fall under Labour administrations worldwide even allowing for unemployment (Shaw *et al.*, 2002). However, as Labour MP and Select Committee member Natasha Engel said on the introduction of

² But still 'managing' to. Only 3 per cent of children's parents could not manage that even in 1999. <http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/pse/welcome.htm>

the new 'welfare' bill designed to ensure that eight out of ten of us soon work, and in a caveat after the obligatory praise³ '... The whole Committee agrees that the 80 per cent. [sic] target is wonderful; it was just the way to reach it that we had slight concerns about.' (Dorling, 2007b). Over half the poor are now in work (but still poor).

- (3) Gross Domestic Product continues to rise quarter on quarter for longer than 'ever' recorded before and increasing our wealth in comparison to that of the rest of the world. True, and without that it is doubtful unemployment would have fallen so consistently (until recently); but that extra wealth is increasingly taken by a small proportion of the rich, while child poverty, even by the government's own measures has not fallen so consistently. Our banks (and Conservative voters) have done well, particularly well, under Labour.
- (4) Some of the poorest of the poor are now better off and fewer people are simultaneously materially, subjectivity and income poor (Brown, 2007). True, but we had to create a new category of poverty to construct this finding and there is growing evidence that widening wealth inequalities and growing debt are creating new inequalities and poverty. The closer we look the more division we see (Thomas & Dorling, 2007).
- (5) We are killing fewer people, especially children, than we were a couple of years ago, as we withdraw from Iraq. Soon the rate at which young British men kill could fall to rates comparable at least to the most violent of other European nations. Who, by the way, do you think pays Mr Blair's wages as he works as Middle East Envoy for the 'Quartet'? That killing was not part of the dream in 1994.

If people in the Labour party did not care, Tony Blair would still be Prime Minister.

I am honestly grateful to Tim and Roberta for their response. I am not a member of the church of the Labour party (or any other) but was brought up in it so I can perhaps appreciate a little of why they feel insulted that I doubt their Party's collective conscience. But it was not the party that lost confidence in Mr Blair and his direction for the party. It was the electorate. Labour dropped Tony because the party wanted to win more than it wanted Tony.

Again, it is worth reading their response. Look at what Tim and Roberta use to reassure themselves. Look at who they feel their enemies are 'a hostile media and an anti-Labour discourse among many academic social scientists' (Blackman & Blackman-Woods, 2007, p. 122). I'm old enough to remember that complaint from a party in power before, along with the claims that things were getting better and that 'there is no alternative'. As our country becomes more like America in many other ways is our politics turning that way to?

³ Yes she has been promoted since. She became the PPS for the (Right Hon as they like to say) Peter Hain, now Secretary of State in the Department for Work and Pensions.

Do we now have two large political parties which dislike each other intensely, but which are beginning to resemble each other more and more, and no alternative of any significant electoral relevance? We have some way to go to get there yet. But the parties continue to believe that fundamentals are getting better, and the cheerleaders for our parties begin to look more and more alike, although they will believe in their hearts and souls that they are different. Tim and Roberta's response helps explain how both parties believe that we cannot aspire for more than a majority just 'coping' while a minority live comfortably and a minority find it difficult or very difficult to manage while living in poverty; in this richest of islands.

I never imagined for a minute as a schoolchild growing up under Margaret Thatcher's rule that I would quote the end of my O-level set-text in the context of a future Labour government having forgotten for what it had dreamed, and what happens when you forget to dream. It is not too late for Labour to find its soul, but the search is on, there are policy positions at home that have to be withdrawn from too. Alternatively:

Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which. (Orwell, 1946, p. 139)

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