

# The lost world of the British Labour Party? Community, infiltration and disunity

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**Abstract** Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s notion of the ‘imagined community’, this article examines the evolution of the British Labour Party’s sense of self as an organisation. Accordingly, the analysis interrogates the interrelated elements of history, culture, identity and party structure. It is argued that Labour has moved substantially from the collective class-based notions it once used to define its politics and effectively demarcate its boundaries. In place of these, an increasing focus has been placed on giving the party’s political practices an outward-looking, diverse and more individualistic focus. Consequently, Labour’s difficulties during the leadership election of 2015 and since are rooted in the combination of this prolonged push to build a new movement beyond its traditional borders and the persistence of historically grounded tribal concerns about the vulnerability of the party to infiltration.

**Keywords** British politics · Labour Party · Movements · Party identity · Disunity · Party organisation

## Introduction

Since its foundation, the British Labour Party has gone through multiple changes to its organisational form and structure. Whilst various accounts of the battles, debates and structural effects of such changes exist, little work has been done to explore the relationship between organisational change in the party and Labour’s political identity across this history. In this vein, this paper draws on the framework of Benedict Anderson’s (2006) ‘imagined community’ in order to analyse the way in

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which the Labour Party's own sense of community has changed since its foundation. This approach is a marked departure from established approaches to understanding Labour's internal and organisational politics, which have rarely focused on issues of party culture, history, identity and organisation simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> The language of party elites in their engagement in organisational politics and organisational change, and their construction and reconstruction of Labour's organisational identity, forms the empirical object of this analysis.<sup>2</sup>

It is argued that Labour's recent organisational developments under Ed Miliband and intra-party troubles since the leadership election of 2015 should be viewed as events rooted in much deeper historical shifts in the party's political culture. Through this shifting culture, the borders of the Labour Party and the Labour Movement have been slowly redrawn across the course of the twentieth century by party elites. Labour's organisational origins were defined by a notion of community that marked out class and collectivism as essential components of the party's political identity, political practices and political boundaries. Through the mobilisation of such a notion, lines were drawn by party elites between Labour and others on the political left.

However, since the rise of 'modernisers' in the 1980s, the party's organisational imagined community of class and collective politics has been gradually eroded. In its place, party leaders from Kinnock onwards increasingly stressed the role of the individual in Labour's changing political and organisational identity. In doing so, they sought to break down 'old' class-based collectivist barriers. They argued these barriers stood between Labour and a new mass of moderate individuals who were looking to involve themselves in the party. However, despite this prolonged attempt at 'opening up', outcries of entryism by Labour MPs opposed to Corbyn in 2015 demonstrate that the Labour Party now finds increasing tension within its own conception of itself. A contradiction has been exposed between an imagined community that is premised on notions of class decline, popular ordinariness and political participation on the one hand, and Labour's historical concern with demarcating itself from political opponents on its left on the other.

The theoretical importance of the concept of the 'imagined community' to the study of Labour's intra-party politics is first established before three key periods in the development of Labour's imagined community are then considered. First, the founding imagined community of the Labour Party is outlined. Subsequently, the key period of organisational modernisation between 1979 and 1997 is explored. Finally, this paper then goes on to analyse the influence of Ed Miliband's party reforms on the party's organisational identity and the disunity that emerged during the running of the leadership contest in 2015. Through this periodisation, this article provides not a blow-by-blow account of organisational battles, but a historical

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<sup>1</sup> For some notable exceptions see Black (2003), Drucker (1979), Fielding (2007), Lawrence (2007), Wickham-Jones and Jobson (2010) and Worley (2009).

<sup>2</sup> This material is drawn from a larger project on elite narratives and organisational change in the British Labour Party. Elites were selected for interview because of their close involvement in the design and presentation of organisational reform packages and their acute importance in episodes in which issues like entryism were of great concern. This material is used to elucidate and support the textual and archival material.



analysis that is aimed specifically at cutting into the direction of travel that has taken place within Labour's organisational identity across its history.

## The need to imagine

Political parties, in their establishment, development and evolution, are subject to cultural understandings produced and reproduced by actors across their history. These understandings tie issues of organisation to questions of identity. Within this relationship, ideas provide a legitimating story central to the integrity of the party by defining who belongs and who does not. In this vein, political parties are more than just mechanistic structures; they are constitutive of a narrated relationship—an imagined community—which is held in common by their members, and which acts as a fluid definition of the thing itself.

There are several parallels between Anderson's (2006) conception of the imagined communities of the nation and political parties. Faucher-King (2005, pp. 44–70) has observed that political parties such as Labour are imagined in that they are, like nations, not premised or founded as identities on the idea that they are based solely on the face-to-face interaction of their members. As a result, ideas about who and what Labour is, this crucial identity, rest upon an imagined conception of the whole. Whilst a very small political party might make this kind of interaction and identity possible, with growth, mass membership, differing levels of participation and geographic dispersal comes an increasing need for a collective idea of what the party is. Such a collective idea goes above and beyond any direct microscopic consideration of the actual people within. This holds especially true in a party as large and historically substantial as Labour; a party which has in its past more than adequately justified Duverger's (1954) descriptive label of 'mass'.

Labour's identity is not solely of the present but has longevity and continuity as a result of its existence in time and space. The markers of this political heritage form a further part of its impulse to imagine. In this sense, we may well be witnessing the continued cultural shadows of a party that 'was the natural, effective instrument of adaptation of a working-class movement to a society which itself—during the whole existence of labourism—leaned instinctively and whole-heartedly towards the past'. (Nairn 1964, p. 1). As a result, people past and present are incorporated into the party's imaginings. They are embedded within the cultural reflexes of a party so often fixated on its history, in which various uses of the past acquire a mythological status (see Lawrence 2007). Recent events demonstrated the continued importance of this, when Labour General Secretary Ian McNicol prefaced the announcement of Jeremy Corbyn as the newly elected leader by emphasising that:

...this Labour Party is bigger than any one of us. Our Leaders have come and gone down the decades. Some, like Clem Attlee, have led for twenty years and taken us into glorious victories. Others like John Smith have been taken all too soon, denied the chance to serve. But each has strived and struggled and sacrificed for the party we love. This party doesn't belong to us, we merely hold it in temporary trust. (McNicol 2015)



Labour is then much like a nation in Anderson's sense in that it is premised on the idea that, as a political party, it is far more than individual people and their interactions alone. In fact, in this characterisation, these individuals are secondary to the membership and body of the party in a collective overarching sense. The interaction between this amorphous conception of the party and concerns about issues of infiltration, entryism and democratic distortion is crucial in that this imagined community sets the boundaries of this collective body and who can be part of it. In this important sense, the political identity of Labour goes significantly beyond the limits of an identity which is solely 'negatively defined' as argued by Eric Hobsbawm in relation to the left (Hobsbawm 1996, p. 40). Here, the 'us' is as important as the 'other'.

The tensions of producing and reproducing community imaginings are, in a basic sense, intrinsic to the very nature of competitive party politics. Such a structure requires that political parties have defined boundaries and borders in order to distinguish themselves from their competitors, who are constitutive of other political communities. All the while, the notion of imagined community must be wide enough in order to facilitate those currently not situated within the organisation to sign-up and join in. Just as 'no nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind' (Anderson 2006, p. 7), with competitive party politics comes the need for a distinction. This distinction is found even within any representation of the party as 'One Nation' or representative of the 'People'; Labour is not subsequently claiming to be willing to include within its ranks active Conservatives or members of the Socialist Workers Party.

This necessary demarcation is achieved through boundaries or, within the language of Anderson's nations, borders. The rules and norms through which the Labour Party continually practises itself are important to this sense of border (Drucker 1979). However, these borders are manifested in their fullest and most impactful sense by Labour's elites in the way they manage its participation in modern politics through drawing on conceptions of this imagined community to drive change and shape organisational structure. Through this dialogic relationship, issues of democracy, political mission, participation and exclusion manifest together. In this vein, during Labour's early years, the marrying of notions of class and collective politics with party structures and political practices provided the basis of a cohesive and defined imagined community through which its sense of self and political borders were defined.

### **The making of Labour's community: a heart of class**

The period from 1900 to 1918 saw the founding of the Labour Representation Committee as the parliamentary and political representation of the union movement and the transformation of this into the formal organisation of the Labour Party. Within this time, Labour's imagined community became inexorably tied to the party's sense of the world and its purpose within it. The drive to formalise the political structures of the party through shoring up the position of the unions, the role of conference and the place of individual members from beyond the affiliated



organisations took hold and resulted in the constitution of 1918. Within this drive was an association between the developing, broad-based but intrinsically class-centred identity of the party and a culture of democratic practice in which collective forms of representation dominated. Through this a harmony was achieved between the political mission of the party and its praxis. The consequence was a distinct but spacious political identity through which it could distinguish itself and its opponents.

A multiplicity of interconnected left-wing layers and distinctive identities came together around a series of broadly unifying—if unwritten—principles, the result of which was the construction of a ‘broad church’ (Worley 2009, pp. 1–12). The vague summation of these principles revolved around Clause IV which committed the party:

To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service. (Labour Party 1918, p. 140)

The cohesiveness of this broad church was maintained by the walking of an awkward line between two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, the Labour Party established a culture of openness and debate in which comradely discussion of the issues was welcomed. On the other, cohesiveness was maintained through an unwillingness to engage with intellectuals and to codify rigidly or dogmatically the Labour Party’s political position in any intellectualised or precise sense (Drucker 1979; Stack 2009). In this wariness of dogmatic intellectual codification and as a result of the fostering of a discursive culture, it encapsulated the fractures in thinking that came to define the British Left both within and beyond the walls of the party itself. This attitude has enabled the party to accommodate a diverse array of left-wing traditions stretching from Marxism to the Third Way.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst it was bereft of the codified principles of its European counterparts, the Labour Party did establish during this period an identity; a short-hand descriptor of what it was, who it stood for and who could not be a part of its organisational political space. Broad churches may well be diverse but they are, in the end, a house in which the congregation hold some form of common faith. This identity was both reflective of breadth and a commitment to the politics of class. It was around this that the notional borders of the party were drawn and it was in the way that these elements were combined that Labour built itself the political shelter psychologically necessary for a party on the rise against established political forces.

Labour’s commitment to class was not restrictive. The conference report of 1918 records the remarks of the conference Chair W. F. Purdy which contend that, in throwing open its doors to the masses, the Labour Party ‘...will include the worker, whether by hand or brain, if he accept our constitution’. (Labour Party 1918, p. 94)

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough analysis of the various ways in which these different strands factionalised and engaged in Labour’s intra-party and organisational politics before the 1980s see Minkin (1978).



In this vein, the idea of the working-class within Labour was a symbolic one rather than a dominant one and the workers acted as a focus rather than as a materially defined limitation on activism, membership and inclusion. Nevertheless, this symbolism was both a powerful tool in determining the boundaries of the party and a rallying point around which both working and middle classes could coalesce. As Arthur Henderson described at the very same conference of 1918, the Labour Party could only achieve its goals and recruit supporters within its ranks:

...by saying to every man and every woman who was a citizen—and even if they had not got the vote but were likely to get it—“Come along with us, our platform is broad enough and our movement big enough to take you all”.  
(Labour Party 1918, p. 100)

Far from wrapping itself in the fog of class warfare, Labour elites were describing—and by consequence establishing an expectation—that Labour was a party centred in class but open to all seeking to be a part of this journey. Lawrence (2011) has argued that this openness was expansive and included workers from the middle and working classes, as part of the party’s ‘People’s Party’ mantle. In this vein, Labour was based in the workers but in spacious and malleable sense, with an open conception of the ‘people’ that could be acceptably involved, so long as they were seeking to embrace the working-class movement, its ideals and the idea that only through this would socio-political progress and real emancipation be achieved (see Hobsbawm 1996).

Continuity was established between collective notions of class, the workings of trade unionism and the workings of the party. Material organisational and constitutional changes—the centrality of conference, the outlawing of any individuals belonging to other political parties and the need for all members and candidates to subscribe to the constitution—reflected a gradual push for greater managerial control in the name of an identity that premised a need for unity and cohesiveness. Sovereignty was poured into the body of conference in the name of this working-class identity and in a drive by elites to draw a clear boundary between the Labour Party and those on its left (see Shaw 1988). Collective modes of democratic and political practice came to dominate the party with the clear importance of committees and the collective functioning of the central body of conference bringing together the now federal party structures, each wrapped up in ideas of expressing collective will. Labour’s sense of self and its political character was strong and cohesive.

This marrying of political identity and practice endured in its capacity to draw Labour’s borders in the tussles of tribal politics. Thorpe (2014) describes how, between 1939 and 1946, party elites completely shut out any possibility of Labour affiliation with the Communist Party of Great Britain. They did this by drawing on a clear sense of the party’s status as the exclusive effective representative of working people and the labour movement and coupling this with an experientially driven opposition to communism and its anti-democratic elements. The NEC concluded in 1945 in rejecting the last CPGB bid to affiliate, that a clear ‘gulf’ existed between the Communist Party and the Labour Party in their aims. Because of their positions, which rendered them completely incapable of effectively representing the labour



movement, the CPGB as an organisation was incapable of being absorbed into the collectively understood and arbitrated bounds of the party. As General Secretary Morgan Phillips later explained to an opponent of this view:

Unity is not achieved by a superficial association of the parent body with a number of splinter organisations, it can only be achieved by the dissolution of the splinters and the entry of their membership into the Labour Party as individual members, accepting the full responsibilities of membership and the policy democratically determined at Annual Conferences of the Party. (Phillips 1945a, b)

A red line was drawn and, somewhat paradoxically, the only way to cross this line was for individuals to submit themselves fully to the Labour Party, its collective community and governing instruments couched in collective notions of will and representation. Despite this paradox, a result of this difficult need for boundaries and inclusiveness, it was with this clarity of identity that Nairn's claim that 'Labourism is a system which cannot be led by revolutionaries' manifested in organisational terms (Nairn 1964, p. 2).

Labour's organisational early years left a legacy that is particularly tribalistic, with elites having conceived of the party in collective class-representative forms. Through this, its political mission was defined and its opponents were clear. However, whilst these early years were marked by a degree of continuity between *raison d'être* and political practice, one of the most notable features of the 2015 leadership election was the difficulty that the leadership and candidates had in effectively mobilising a collective sense of mission and tribalism in the midst of worries about infiltration and entryism. Concerns became technicised as the leadership fought to try and find a way of defining the boundaries of the party in a new electoral system which had made borders more porous than ever before. The roots of this problem in organisational terms took hold in the 1980s, where a new, looser and more individualised imagined community was gradually married to political practices. For Labour, this appears to have amounted to a loss of a sense of a traditional political tribalism. And, for a party which is historically minded and haunted by historical episodes of entryism and infiltration, this offered real space in which conflict and disunity over borders could erupt.

## Unmaking Labour's collective

Under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, the sands of the party's mission were shifting and, with this, Labour's imagined community and sense of self began to change. New ideological adaptations emerged within policy. These spread into the ideas underpinning reforms to the very structure of the party and its collective forms of democratic practice. The exorcism of Militant signalled what was to be the last exertion of a clearly tribal political identity rooted in both the parliamentarism and working-class representation of years past. What followed was a gradual surge towards the new millennium, in which successive leaders sought to bring the more individualistic and diverse outside in, bringing a new representativeness and



moderation through ‘democracy’.<sup>4</sup> With this, the dialogue between Labour’s identity and organisational form began to mutate, slowly changing the very meaning of what it meant for Labour to be a political party in this modern and more individualistic age.

The treatment of the Militant Tendency and their extraction from the Labour Party exemplifies a continuation of the broadly class-based political spirit outlined above and bore the marks of the previous CPGB expulsions. The Militant Tendency was a Trotskyist organisation that had been pursuing entryist tactics since the 1960s, in order to gain influence and control over Labour Party local parties and machinery (see Crick 1986; Seyd 1987, pp. 50–54). Shaw (1988, pp. 218–253) describes how the confrontation and removal of Militant by Kinnock was demonstrative of a resurgence of a defined centralism in which the leadership sought to exert a greater control over the party, its image and its managerial structures.

Along with this came the robust application of a political identity by the leadership in order to thwart the tactics of a clearly defined interloper from the left. General Secretary Larry Whitty later reflected with certainty that ‘this was an organisation that supposedly didn’t have members, but you knew who they were’.<sup>5</sup> In this spirit of certainty, Kinnock (1985) took on the ‘grotesque chaos of a Labour council hiring taxis to scuttle round a city handing out redundancy notices to its own workers’, damning the left-wing faction for its ideological rigidity and consequent incompatibility with Labour’s role as representative of ordinary working people. Once again, Labour’s commitment to a broad notion of class provided a functional conception of community. Kinnock and his supporters mobilised this in order to draw a clear line between Labour and Militant, finding a robust certainty over Labour’s political boundaries that was absent 30 years later after the start of the leadership contest of 2015.

However, the centrality of this notion of community did not remain. Subsequently, under the successive leaderships of Kinnock, Smith and Blair, there was a marked move towards the individual. This took Labour away from the traditional collectives found in the historically rooted class-based construction of Labour’s imagined community that had been so important since its foundation. Such a move manifested in both ideology and, more gradually, structural form, with important implications for the party’s sense of self.

Politicians of the period might well suggest that this renewed focus on the individual and the move away from more traditional and defined ideas of class was a response to changes in the broader socio-political landscape; that class was no longer important in the ‘real world’. However, both political scientists and historians have offered convincing analyses of the important role that language has played in the evolution of the politics of class. Evans and Tilley (2012) argue that the decline in class voting can be primarily explained by the move away from the language of class by politicians rather than socio-economic change. Lawrence and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (2012) echo this in their assessment of the transformative

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the individualisation of democracy in British political parties and the increase in individual balloting at Labour Party conference, see the work of Faucher-King (2005, pp. 191–213).

<sup>5</sup> Research interview with Lord Whitty, 24th June 2015.





capacity of Thatcherism as being rooted in its new language of ordinariness rather than as an expression of societal change that was already occurring. Furthermore, Todd (2014a, b) highlights how, whilst the meanings of class labels may well have shifted amongst the working-class, the period from the 1980s onwards is one where a common experience amongst those having to work to subsist still exists and demonstrates substantial continuities with the preceding years of the century. In this vein, the move away from class in Labour's own imagined community should also be viewed as the product of party elites and their transformative linguistic shift, rather than just a response to a material social reality.

Changes in the notions of collectives as drawn from class and the centrality of these, led by self-styled 'modernisers', are apparent in the substantial shifts to the ideological basis of the Labour Party that took place at this time. In the late 1980s, the leadership began sowing idiosyncratic seeds in their emphasis on explaining the benefits of socialism on the level of the individual and by focusing particularly on social democracy as a gateway to individual choice. As the statement of Labour's aims and values in 1988 emphasised: 'unless men and women have the power to choose, the right to choose has no value'. (Labour Party 1988, p. 3) On the pages of *New Left Review*, Hilary Wainwright described this as a turn amongst the leadership to the 'religion of individualism' (Wainwright 1987a). The traditional fabric of the collective identity of the Labour Party was gradually but surely being unspun within the party's ideology.

Once Labour had charted its way back to government as 'New Labour' in the late 1990s, it was ready to introduce and execute a political programme that was based even further on this personal and singularising focus. This came complete with an explicit look to the traditions of liberalism for inspiration in a drastically reimagined world of the late twentieth century. As Blair described in 1995:

The ultimate objective is a new political consensus of the left-of-centre, based around the key values of democratic socialism and European social democracy...To reach that consensus we must value the contribution of Lloyd George, Beveridge and Keynes and not just Attlee, Bevan or Crosland. (Blair 1995, p. 4)

The symbolism of the changes to Clause IV, which removed explicit reference to the nationalisation of industry and to 'workers' instead emphasised democratic socialism and shared benefits, was combined with an unequivocal turn to liberal thinking. Such a focus became central to the renewed political outlook of the party, with its dedication to the aspirational, competitive and dynamic individuals of a substantially reimagined society in which class, when present at all, was drastically different. Shaw (2008) argues that this amounted to the substantial abandonment of notions of community and collective upon which Labour had been founded and the losing of an important aspect of Labour's 'soul' in political terms.<sup>6</sup>

The co-dependence between Labour's culture, identity and structure gave rise to organisational expressions of this ideological shift. The relationship between body and soul is often a fuzzy and ambiguous one. However, in this case, the

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of this work, see Andersson et al. (2011).



consequence of the change in Labour's soul was the transformation of Labour's organisational body; the erosion of its historical sense of community and sense of itself as an organisation. Successive leaders aimed to achieve a political organisation that was increasingly diverse and reflective of the whole electorate—in its reconstructed form—as ideas of class and collectives in Labour policy and ideology were downplayed. With this reimagining came the need for the forging of a new coalition with new outlooks and interests. Thus, the ideological undercurrents fed gradually out into the structures underpinning Labour's own democratic practices and began to shape the very understandings of what it was as a party.

Collectivist and delegate-style political structures within the party, outside of the bounds of conference, were gradually adapted to this new individualising politics. These changes were aimed at allowing the new and diverse outside in. In the 1980s, the power of General Committees were eroded and replaced by a renewed focus on individual members, whether of the activist or armchair-occupying sort. This meant the gradual replacement of markers of Labour's collective organisational ethos. One-Member-One-Vote was slowly spread across the party, initially removing the power of General Committees to select candidates in 1987. This was done under the auspices of making Labour the 'most democratic party in Britain and laying down the framework for creating a party which welcomes new recruits into its ranks and then gives them something to participate in, real participation'. (Labour Party 1987, p. 17). These were soon followed by later changes to the policy-making process and the encouragement of a further spread of individual balloting, alongside a simultaneous tightening of the control of the centre which was able to exert itself over candidate shortlists in by-elections. In addition, greater central control was placed over the print forms of community, with the eventual closing of Labour's newspaper *Labour Weekly* in 1987 (see Shaw 1994, pp. 108–123).

Looking back on these reforms, Neil Kinnock described how, as a whole, they were aimed at creating 'a modern, mass-membership, deliberative organisation, capable of stimulating inspiration and earning trust'.<sup>7</sup> His former Chief of Staff Charles Clarke spoke in similar but characteristically frank terms, explaining that:

Our philosophy was that a more democratic Labour Party, where individual members actually had more of a stake in what was happening than the rather alien bureaucratic process of the Labour Party, would lead to more sensible positions.<sup>8</sup>

The Labour Party was now quite consciously seeking to be a mass but, in important senses, it became a mass of individuals in a way it had never been. These individuals became more present within this imagined community, although organisational changes were reflective of only a partial individualisation and the sovereign body of conference remained central. Trade unions remained significant within this sense of community and collective notions were, at this stage, only partly eroded. Wainwright (1987b) argued that the result of these changes was best described as a 'tale of two parties' in which the leadership and its supporters were

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<sup>7</sup> Research interview with Lord Kinnock, 13th July 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Research interview with Charles Clarke, 23rd July 2015.



becoming increasingly dislocated from a more energised and radical section of the membership.

This individualising philosophy grew through the way that leaderships approached the party in the years that followed. General Secretary Larry Witty described to Conference the intentions behind reviewing the union-link in the wake of the election defeat of 1992, explaining that ‘in our continued attempts to turn the membership round, the party is looking to involve more and more individual trade unionists in the party as full members of the party’. The result was to be a party that was ‘more democratic, pluralistic, modern and dynamic’. This meant finding a way of retaining the union relationship in a new form so as ‘to be open to new influences beyond the trade union movement’. (Labour Party 1992, pp. 182–183). The outcome of this was the eradication of the trade union block vote a year later, placing new demands on unions to ballot individuals and putting a new emphasis on individual unionists and their participation (see Minkin 1992, pp. 362–394; Wickham-Jones 2012). Alongside this, the focus on individual balloting had spread far further and was now fully embraced in candidate selection, the members’ section of the electoral college and in the election of representatives to the NEC. The real turn of the party towards individuals beyond its traditional boundaries had begun.

Labour’s imagined community in this period changed in substantial ways and these ideas can be traced from ideological adaptations into the moves to reimagine and repurpose the very identity of the Party as a political body at the grassroots level. After the confrontation of Militant, the leaderships of Kinnock and Smith saw the removal of many organisational elements that were an important cultural reflection of Labour’s own position as an interest-driven political party. Ultimately, this meant the decline of a legitimating idea that had been central to the clear determination of Labour’s political borders in the course of its history. The ideas that underpinned these continued through the leadership of Blair, although far less organisational attention was paid to the party (particularly once in office) beyond the substantial extraction of policy-making functions from Conference to the National Policy Forum in the late 1990s (see Fielding 2002, pp. 116–144; Russell 2005). Throughout this period, the collective practices of unions, union members and Labour members were each reshaped with a new focus on attracting those from beyond the seemingly restrictive notions of class and class-based political progress of Labour’s founding culture. Labour was systematically folding down its walls and aiming to draw in the ideas of others. The logics of these changes continued to have real currency in the reconstruction of Labour’s community under Ed Miliband after the party’s return to opposition in 2010.

## **The lost world of Labour: a party transformed?**

In the early twentieth century, G.D.H Cole argued that ‘The Labour Party reflects trade unionism and cannot surpass it’ (Cole 1973, p. 15). Exactly 100 years on from the first publication of Cole’s *The World of Labour*, Ed Miliband undertook reforms to the Labour Party membership structure and union-linkage that made clear that, in his view, Labour’s world had dramatically changed and that it was now time for the



party to take the lead. In all of this, the need to bring the outside in was intensified and the party's look to the individual deepened. Labour was to be the democratic vehicle of a new but fractured progressive constituency which was waiting to be saddled, trained into a more unified political force and jockeyed to victory. By the 2015 leadership contest, the party establishment was living out a paradox. The very thrust of ideas which had enmeshed issues of culture, identity and form and instigated a drive to reinvent what it meant to be the Labour party had seemingly allowed the very kind of 'dying' tribe elites had sought to marginalise to take the reins.

In the early days of Miliband's leadership, the attempt to 'Refound' Labour as an organisation, in response to the perceived marginalisation of its traditional political base, continued in much the same spirit as years past. Peter Hain, the architect of these reforms, described how Labour needed a movement renaissance:

But in order to create a mass movement we need to reach out to a wider range of individual supporters, community groups and national organisations to develop ways of working together where we share common aims and of talking through our differences honestly where our views diverge...The Labour family will always be central, but members know that we also need to work with a wider range of friends. (Hain 2011, pp. 5–6).

This was not about recovering the movement of old and its tribal trappings, now seen as outdated in modern Britain, but birthing a new movement with a new outlook, rooted in the politics of diversity and forged out of discussion rather than the existing consensus. In the wake of the Falkirk scandal, these new movement proclivities were asserted even further and with much greater impact.

The reforms themselves constituted two distinct but related elements. The first of these sought to re-cast the financial relationship between the affiliated unions and the Labour Party by introducing an opt-in process. This meant the membership fee of individual unionists could only end up in the hands of the Labour Party, via their union's political fund, if they actively chose to be a part of this collective affiliation. The second element focused on the manifestation of this union-link within the leadership election process. The Electoral College was scrapped. In its place, there was to be an election system which operated on the much vaunted OMOV principle. Within this, party members, affiliated supporters from unions and registered supporters could all take part in a semi-open primary. Both elements were a further restatement of the importance of individuals over collectives. The reforms of this union-link and election process in many ways constituted the exorcism of the last remaining spirits of the collectivist and class-based politics of the Labour Party, leaving the body of Conference as the last piece standing. This not only altered the internal structures of the party, but it also broke down its external boundaries.

As Ed Miliband described when first announcing his intention to seek reform:

A hundred years ago the Trade unions helped found the Labour Party. Decade by decade, from Neil Kinnock to John Smith to Tony Blair, we have been changing that relationship. And in this new politics, we need to do more, not



less, to make individual Trade Union members part of our party. (Miliband 2013)

In this narrative sweep of recent Labour history, further individualising the Labour-union relationship made perfect logical sense. With OMOV practiced in many areas of the party and the eradication of the block vote, no longer should the financial working of this relationship be controlled by those ‘union barons’. Instead, it established a new way to conceive of trade unions, as a collection of variously minded individuals rather than materially aligned comradesly collectives. This fed directly into the practices of the party that emerged. The General Secretary of Unite Len McCluskey, who was supportive on the basis that it provided a clear way for unions to exercise greater leverage over the party, later reflected that ‘Ed Miliband didn’t understand collectivism’.<sup>9</sup> It is perhaps then no coincidence that only one truly collective body in the form of party conference remains. And, whilst conference may well be key to party governance and legitimacy, it does not and cannot alone produce and enforce its imagined boundaries.

With the introduction of the semi-open primary, the consequences of Labour’s new world and new democracy were to become even more real. The sole limitation on the ‘registered supporters’ was that they subscribe to the ‘aims and values’ of the Labour Party. With the decline in perceptions of class in Labour’s politics and the awkward legacies of the Third Way, these were more vague and ill-defined than they ever had been. In the 1980s, Raphael Samuel described how politics was no longer distinctively tribal and political parties were mere vessels (Samuel 1985, p. 6). The notions of democracy central to Labour’s more recent organisational changes align with such a description. As Miliband described:

Understanding we live in a world where individuals rightly demand a voice. Where parties need to reach out far beyond their membership. And where our Party always looks like the diverse country we seek to serve. Representing the national interest. Building a better politics starts by building a party that is truly rooted in every community and every walk of life. (Miliband 2013)

Democracy was no longer seen as something to be gained through a commitment to collectives and class emancipation. Instead, democracy was something to be practiced by a reinvigoration of Labour through individual activism and the opening of the party to a whole new range of progressive political modalities existent in British society so as to ‘hear the voices of individual working people louder and clearer than ever before’. (The Independent 2013).

Without careful thought, these kinds of structures can have hazardous results. Within political science, Scarrow (2014) has argued that the consequences of this kind of participation can be confusion about the source of authority within a political party. In the context of Labour, Garland (2016) has argued that such a shift heralds a period of uncertainty about the precise *demos* and its sources of authority in a party founded on notions of interest-representation. Together though, these changes are much more a symptom than they are a cause; a sign of a historical

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<sup>9</sup> Research interview with Len McCluskey, 10th February 2016.



decline in the collective and class basis of the Labour Party as a result of a gradual reimagining of Labour's community by its political elites.

The aim was to be reflective of a society envisioned as being varied in its make-up, political expressions and desires. Labour was not to be the political consequence of an already existent and materially aligned movement which had its basis in the workers and the common experiences of class. Instead, the overriding goal of this package of reforms was 'to make Labour a movement that will change Britain for the better'. (Collins 2014, p. 18). In the process, this kind of engagement was as much the new birth of a movement as it was a movement reborn. As Miliband put it:

...all of the evidence is you need leadership but you also need movements. Everything from workers' rights to gay rights, equal pay to the minimum wage. All of the big changes nationally and internationally happened because movements made them happen...I want us to be an expanding party in government and reaching out to new people. (Wright 2014)

The Labour Party was now to be defined as an organisation as the conglomeration of a wider range of voices aligned in large part by their interest and willingness to get involved in progressive politics in the broadest senses, rather than by any well-defined and pre-existing mission of which the party was the formal political outlet. This look to others for political engagement and essence inverted Labour's historical original position in a substantial way. It also restated, reaffirmed and reinforced an ever-growing commitment to the open end of the openness-distinctiveness dichotomy that all political parties face.

Whilst this development may well have seemed logical in the long view, the outcome has been the most uncomfortable of contradictions, particularly for the 'moderates' driving change. The overarching theme of the Labour movement's mission, one which gave legitimacy to the policies, functioning and boundaries of the party, has been substantively chipped away. It has not been replaced by any developed and explicit codified principles to which its new members or registered supporters need subscribe. Reform was based, in the same vein as reforms across the last 30 years, on the idea that there were others that could get involved in Labour's community and that the party and its sense of self needed to be broadened to capture them. Despite all of this, the actual result was the election Jeremy Corbyn on the back of a surge from a clicktivist youth combined with a returning and reenergised Labour left with new found voice. These new members and supporters bucked the party's established trend of membership decline (see Seyd and Whitley 1992; Pemberton and Wickham-Jones 2013). But, such voices are some way from the community that many Labour elites had continually and optimistically imagined.

Given this, and Labour's difficult past experiences of demarcation, the turmoil around the 2015 leadership election and the revitalised Left should hardly be surprising. Much of the disquiet about the Corbyn surge used this past to articulate the concerns of the present. The Labour MP John Mann argued the election '...should be halted. It is becoming a farce with longstanding members ... in danger of getting trumped by people who have opposed the Labour party and want to break it up—some of it is the Militant Tendency-types coming back in'. (The Guardian 2015). Others weighed into contest such implicit definitions of Labour values, on



the basis that they were not reflective of the real body of the party. As Diane Abbott put it: 'In particular, people want to know what the Labour party values are that people are being vetted against. War on Iraq? Tuition fees? Abstaining on the benefits cap? Nobody knows'. (Abbott 2015). Corbyn himself directly challenged this entryist label, arguing 'the entryism I see is a lot of young people hitherto not really excited by politics coming in for the first time and saying we can have a discussion—we can discuss our debts and housing problems' (The Guardian 2015). In the end, the entryist claims came to very little but they persist as part of a pernicious undercurrent based on the sense amongst some that Corbyn's electors were not really 'Labour' at all.

As a whole, this dispute was the sign of a now deep-seated uncertainty which existed well beyond the technical questions of vetting. After successive years of turning the party inside-out, a real gap had opened up in which there was significant scope for arguing about the suitability of the respective candidates' electorates. In the context of this contest and since, a battle has been raging which is torn between a historical narrative which compels Labour to demarcate its territory on the one hand, and the spirit of a series of reforms founded on open, responsive and anti-tribal politics on the other. The way in which debate over the legitimacy of Momentum has taken place exemplifies this dilemma. For those on the Left like the MP Clive Lewis, the organisation that sprang from Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign, but which is not an official part of the Labour Party itself, was to be lauded for its potential to 'create a mass movement for real progressive change' (Lewis 2015). For others like Stephen Pound who were nervous about the left-wing make-up of this new body, Momentum constituted 'a parallel organisation... against the principles of the Labour Party' (Hodges 2015). In this vein, the political and organisational culture of labourism persists, both resistant to laying down specific, developed and codified principles and historically oriented in its concerns about demarking itself from 'toxic' left-wing counterparts.

However, the world to which this labourist culture was once tied appears to have been lost and, with this, the older and clearer sense of tribalism through which legitimacy amongst Labour's elites over the boundaries of the party was propagated has vanished. Notions of the collectivities of class and class experience, once central to both policy and party structure, were cast aside by successive Labour leaderships in favour of structures which focused to a substantial extent on developing Labour as a political mirror of those that inhabited it. It was in the result of this that a gap for debate about Labour's true purpose was exposed.

This gap did not just open as a result of the way in which 'moderates' had continually reimagined the purpose of the party but because, in the end, the temperate and diverse community they had imagined to be out there waiting to be beckoned in never materialised. The paradoxical destination of years of 'opening up' was fully exposed. This has presented those within the party and others on the British left with a real dilemma. The line between political openness and political definition is undoubtedly one that is challenging to walk. Through this walk, the integrity of a political party is maintained. However, walking this line becomes all the more difficult if the individuals you are waiting for, arms spread, never respond to your call.



## Conclusion

In his influential article ‘The Forward March of Labour Halted?’, Hobsbawm (1978) argued that the left would need to look to form a broad coalition in order to see electoral fruits. After the 2015 defeat and the seismic shift in the geographical politics of the United Kingdom, there is surely real reason to think the pertinence of this principle remains. However, attempts to mobilise such a broad coalition in the context of Labour’s organisation appear to have failed and left the party in an awkward position. This presents the party with difficult choices going forward, each with their own problems.

This article has used Anderson’s (2006) concept of the imagined community as a tool through which to consider the ways in which Labour has constructed itself across its history. Labour’s political and structural foundations were based in a clear but expansive conception of Labour’s relationship with the collectives of class. Through this, party elites were readily able to draw clear boundaries around its political community. However, in the years following the disastrous 1983 election, moves were made to remould Labour’s affinity with these legitimating collectives of class in both ideology and political practice. Labour’s imagined community and structural form became increasingly individualised, as successive leaders sought to open the party up to the ‘outside’. The reforms that left the leadership election process as a semi-open primary were the pinnacle of this well-worn trajectory of change. All the while, Labour continues to be motivated by a difficult and haunting history that moves it to attempt to draw clear lines around who is and is not able to participate in its affairs. It is the awkward combination of these shifts in identity and praxis with Labour’s historically rooted concerns that brought about its present struggles.

Going forward, Labour could endeavour to come together around its now considerable individualism and openness. With this, the party could attempt to embrace somehow the increasing porousness and fluidity that many have been so concerned about since Corbyn’s rise and the leadership election of 2015. This would require elites and members alike to abandon the kind of historicism that is embedded within the psyche of the party, a shift that seems unlikely to be achieved if the 2015 leadership contest is anything to go by.

Instead, and in order to restore a sense of internal coherence on familiar territory, the Labour Party could now attempt to return to a class-based politics and conception of itself. However, whilst this might provide an internal coherence as an organisation, there would no doubt be considerable debate about whether such a basis could be viable electorally. It is unlikely that Labour will alone determine the nature and salience of class issues in that particular regard and the awkward and divisive legacy of the New Labour is still being dealt with.

Alternatively, Labour could attempt to be bolder. Perhaps these recent problems signal a need for the party to seek to redefine itself a more substantial way and develop a more precise statement of what its politics is, who it is for and how it should function. In many ways, debates over this have already begun as party elites have argued over Labour’s political borders. Whether bigger debates begin about





the recodification of Labour principles and a more precise modification of Labour's 'broad church' in thought and organisational structure is yet to be seen. Regardless, how Labour deals with these issues and engages in the construction of its organisational community going forward will continue to have important ramifications for the party's cohesion and sense of self.

## Postscript: the 2016 leadership contest and 2017 general election

Since this article was written, Labour's internal politics have gone through further significant developments. Disquiet within the Parliamentary Labour Party over Corbyn's leadership spilled over in June 2016 and culminated in a leadership contest. In this contest, the debates about entryism and Labour's borders outlined above continued in much the same form as in 2015. The involvement of new members in the leadership ballot and the participation of Momentum members in party affairs proved particularly contentious.

What has followed Corbyn's victory in this second leadership contest has been a period of uneasy stalemate between the party's left and moderate wings. This stalemate was initially reinforced by concerns that Theresa May might call a snap General Election. These concerns proved to be well founded, and Labour's better-than-expected performance at the polls in June of 2017 further bolstered the position of Corbyn and his supporters. However, this stalemate has achieved little by way of resolving the tensions that exist within Labour's imagined community, in which the party's organisation remains both oriented towards a vision of open individualism and moved by a historical tribalism that is hard to shake off. Whether and how this tension is resolved will continue to be important for Labour's integrity going forward.

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