

Labour beyond Glasman: racism, truth & reconciliation

Abstract

In this paper I seek to contribute to the new Blue Labour debate, reflected in the recently published e-book [‘The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox’](#) (2011), co-authored and edited by Maurice Glasman, Jonathan Rutherford, Marc Stears and Stuart White.

I offer a brief critique the e-book, an important contribution to this emergent debate. I focus the critique on probably the most sensitive and controversial policy area for Labour – its paradoxical attitude and policies towards its “immigrant” population.

I then contend that Labour has to look back not only to tradition, but has to confront the facts and roots of its own racist past, if it is resolve this paradox. It should do this through a deliberate process of truth and reconciliation, marking itself out as the party that actually cares about social cohesion.

Finally, I suggest that a “truth and reconciliation” process aimed at closure on Labour’s racist past may also act as a model whereby the labour movement can move towards a more united future more generally.

Introduction

I like what the newly published e-book edited by Maurice Glasman, Jon Rutherford, Marc Stears and Stuart White tries to do – to help the labour movement on its way beyond the New Labour aberration, through an appeal to the movement’s history and tradition.

In this, its intention is not dissimilar to that of my forthcoming book ‘The Fifth Tradition’. I actually do it better, basing my interpretation of the labour movement’s enduring base on people’s actual experiences and (folk) memories rather than on a stylized academic account reaching back to the Norman conquest; an interesting historical diversion though this may be by Maurice Glasman, it doesn’t create any kind of shared history, based on actual facts, for the people who are going to be developing the labour movement of the 2010s.

Indeed, as we shall see, Glasman’s reliance on what is ultimately an elitist interpretation of working class history creates more than a hint of condescension towards the English working class of a type that would make EP Thompson turn in his grave, and my colleague Carl turn in his sleep (see below).

(This is a determinedly theory-free paper, but if there were a section on the epistemological and ontological underpinnings to Glasman’s work, I would argue, from a critical realist position, that his narrative falls prey to an all-too-common relativism, in which realities are “constructed” from the most dominant narratives, and as such simply reflect rather challenge underlying power structures. For myself, my ontological position is that of a single reality, only subsequently interpreted by social forces with different abilities to impose their interpretation, and that while narratives shape subsequent events, the role of the (socialist) historian is to uncover truths from behind the veils of power, not to promulgate power structures.)

Nevertheless, the very fact that opinion formers are seeking a way forward based on an understanding of how real people live and relate to each other, rather than how aspirations and needs can be successfully managed, is a welcome turn.

Ultimately, though, the e-book disappoints. It disappoints because, having established the paradox at the heart of the labour movement between what the author's define as the nation's 'conservatism' and the labour movement's urge to the radical (whether or not inspired by the universal values that Glasman derides), the authors fail to identify any way of resolving that paradox.

So here I offer my thoughts on how the 'politics of paradox' (to quote the subtitle to the book) might become, in time, a politics of unity. Of course, the editors should have offered me (and others) this opportunity in the first place - it is a shame that the Oxford and London seminars that led to the book's publication were quite so restrictive of their membership - but perhaps it is not too late to for them to put this contribution into the second edition.

Narrative vs. reality: Labour's "immigration" dilemma

My contribution focuses on how a central – and currently the most controversial – paradox in the labour movement might be resolved. This is Labour's attitude to immigrants, or more properly, to Black British and Asian ethnic minorities; as Bourdieu reminds us in [Acts of Resistance \(1988\)](#), the use of the word immigrants to describe people who have already arrived is illogical:

“[H]ow can one speak of immigrants to refer to people who have not emigrated from anywhere and who are moreover described as second generation?” (p.16).

In critiquing and seeking to advance on 'Blue Labour' thinking, I will focus on the text of the e-book, and not on Glasman's [recent controversial interview statement](#) (Progress, 2011) on the need for Labour to reach out to the EDL and its supporters' supposedly legitimate insecurities and group needs. I will be charitable towards someone with a long track record in tackling discrimination in the East End of London, and assume that there was an element of foot-and-mouth in the interview in question, or at least a legitimate enough desire for publicity-via-controversy which meant he ended up saying things which I'm sure he doesn't really believe.

Glasman does not in fact refer directly to immigration or immigrants in his introductory, scene-setting chapter to the e-book. This is in itself useful; more important for the longer term than what Glasman himself thinks is how his "seminal essay" (as James Purnell refers to Glasman's in his own response) is interpreted by the Oxford London seminar attendees, drawn from "various factions" of the Labour movement/academia (see [Alan Finlayson's useful commentary at Open Democracy](#)).

Jonathan Rutherford sets the tone, by confusing the act of immigration and how "the nation" relates to people of immigrant stock :

“Cosmopolitanism is viewed by many as a symptom of a wider loss of control over one's working and daily life, over immigration, and over the cultural integrity of the nation (p.102).”

Bourdieu's simple point (see above) is important here, because Rutherford's lazy language reflects a broader tendency to accept the dominant narrative about immigration as, *prima facie*, a threat to "cultural integrity".

In the British context, particularly, such a narrative does not fit with the facts of immigration, for while recent immigration has been largely from Eastern Europe, this in itself has not created concern about the loss of cultural identity (as opposed to concern about pressure on public services). The perceived threat to “cultural identity” is actually to do with the relationship between (now longstanding) British Asian (and to a much lesser extent Afro-Caribbean) people and White British people.

For Rutherford to merge the two issues within one sentence is not only unfortunate; it reflects the extent to which “anything to do with immigration is bad” narrative has taken hold. Rutherford then goes on, just two pages later, to suggest that:

“Social ties and associations need renewing, and the excluded to be included. (p.104)”

Frankly, given the dominance of the anti-immigrant narrative infuses even Rutherford’s own language, this seems a vacuous exhortation.

Graeme Cooke, in his contribution, does much the same thing:

“The issue of immigration falls directly on this fault line, tied up with the politics of economic insecurity and cultural identity. The activities of the English Defence League, while marginal for now, show how toxic and visceral this mix can be. There are no easy answers, but the conventional language and strategies of the left struggle to cope.On immigration policy directly, migration would be managed, with new arrivals welcomed but expected to contribute and engage. But this is far from enough (p.138).”

Again, the issue of cultural identity is merged with economic insecurity, all under the catch-all theme of immigration, even though in the 2000s and 2010s these issues have been related to two very different phenomena. Very clearly the English Defence League is more concerned with its anti-Islam agenda than with Eastern European migrant workers, but the proposed “solution” – as far as it goes - relates to new arrivals, not to longstanding residents of England.

Ultimately, this acceptance of dominant narrative about immigration/immigrants as a problem to be tackled stops Labour resolving its own electoral “immigration problem”.

This problem can be boiled down to the following dilemma: a) if Labour is “weak on immigration”, it’s seen as not caring about the legitimate needs of its core (white) working class constituency; b) if Labour tries to get “tough on immigration”, it is seen as betraying its own ideals of tolerance, fairness and equality of opportunity, and this is a vote loser amongst the liberal middle class that it needs to appeal to if it is to win seats outside its core areas.

In this dilemma, the fact that immigration policy (decisions about who can come and live in Britain) is a substantively different issue from “immigrant” policy (how people of overseas background live in Britain) is an irrelevance; it’s all about the narrative.

And in this dilemma, when eventually forced to take a stance, Labour politicians jump to the right. That’s what Ed Balls did last summer during the leadership contest, alienating the section of the party that Glasman contends is motivated by universal values of fairness and equality, and it’s what Hazel Blears does in her contribution to the e-book:

“[S]ome felt that Labour had lost touch with working-class voters over immigration (p.145)”.

Here, Blears gives a clear indication that [Alan Finlayson](#) (see above) is right when he concludes of the Blue Labour initiative:

“Those who think that Labour lost in 2010 only because it was soft on immigration, and that one wins in politics by moving to the centre rather than moving the centre towards you, are now regrouping under the label of ‘Purple Labour’ where they will leave Glasman behind.”

Reality vs. Narrative: immigration revisited

The Conservatives must love Labour’s “immigration” dilemma. They must love the fact that Cameron can give his pre-election dog whistle, black person-blame speech, cynically merging immigration and integration (The Guardian, 2011), safe in the knowledge that the Labour leadership won’t be able to respond for fear of alienating its core vote. Those Conservatives paying attention must have loved Sunny Hundal’s (perfectly justified in the shorter term) call at [political blog Liberal Conspiracy \(2011\)](#) for a tactical silence on Cameron’s racist overtures almost as much as they will have enjoyed Yvette Cooper’s response Labour Party 2011) focused on the immigration policy “chaos” rather than on Cameron’s opportunist racism.

So if Glasman’s Blue Labour appeal to the working class’s need for security and belonging fails, as I have suggested above, to resolve Labour’s ongoing dilemma, what can be done to resolve it? What can be done to differentiate Labour’s approach to immigration and the accompanying multiculturalism debate from that of the Conservatives.

The answer is simple enough. Labour needs to revisit the facts, not the narrative; if it is to move forward at all on this issue, it needs to root out the cause of the problem in the first place.

This will not be a comfortable exercise, because it means confronting Labour’s own racist past. It means looking beyond the comfortable traditions, extolled by Glasman, of social cohesiveness and belonging, and acknowledging that Labour has, at a crucial period in its history, fallen foul of quite different motivations and actions, and it means being upfront about the terrible legacy this has brought upon our country through its creation of stigmatized, marginalized and sometimes angry minorities.

The best place to start on this potentially painful but necessary exercise is, I suggest a short chapter in a small book from 1968, ‘Matters of Principle: Labour’s Last Chance, written by John Rex, then en route to becoming an eminent Professor of Sociology.

Rex does not mince his words. The chapter is entitled “The Race Relations Catastrophe”, and in its 14 pages (p 70-83) Rex sets out, in a tone half way between anger and despair, the betrayal he feels at how the Labour government of 1964-1968 has acted both on immigration policy and on treatment of new arrivals:

“In 1964 the Labour party refused to be drawn into a racial debate on the hustings, and following the election, Harold Wilson’s dismissal of Peter Griffiths as a Parliamentary leper seemed to augur well for race relations in Britain.....

“Somewhere along the line, however, something went wrong. By the beginning of July 1965, the Parliamentary Party was beginning to respond to Tory agitation for stricter immigration control by agreeing that immigration was creating problems in social services, and making it clear that something would be done to limit the inflow of coloured people from the Commonwealth.....

“There is little point in pretending that the [1965] White Paper was not a racist document. Why else should it begin with a separation of the statistics for immigration from Canada, Australia and New Zealand and immigration from ‘other Commonwealth countries’?.....

“The Labour Party conference was to be told that Part Four [of the White Paper] contained many positive proposals and that the whole policy was intended to benefit ‘those who were already here’. To those who looked closely at Part four, however, it was difficult to see anything there, apart from the setting up of the archbishop’s committee, which would not have been entirely acceptable to the Conservative Party of Smethwick. Indeed, in the view of some of us, the so-called positive proposals could be read as a series of punitive measures against immigrants who from time to time were to be used as a scapegoat for local government failure.

“The crux of the matter was housing. The incoming immigrants of the fifties had found themselves faced by massive discrimination in the private and public housing sectors alike. White landlords of privately owned dwellings would not take coloured tenants, building societies and estate agents conspired to keep coloured housebuyers out of the ‘nice’ neighbourhoods, and, in nearly all areas, they were kept off the council’s list as newcomers, and thereby diverted into slum property in the decaying inner ring.....

“Instead of pointing out the facts about discrimination, however, the White Paper’s section on housing began with a fatuous warning that there must be no discrimination *in favour* of housing, and went on to claim that in time they would be housed in the ordinary way. It condemned the landlords of multi-occupied lodging houses and recommended Birmingham’s Act [the restriction of multi-occupation housing to ‘suitable’ areas] to other areas as a way of stopping multi-occupation from spreading. Thus, the regular prosecution of landlords pioneered by Birmingham, in which 97 per cent of the successful prosecutions were of Asiatics, and which ensured that the public would blame coloured men for the deterioration of the city, was commended as a policy to the country at large” (p.70-73).

Thus the die was cast, and cast by a Labour government in conjunction with Labour local authorities (and, in the case of the workplace, in conjunction with trade union establishments). The ‘white working class’ complaint that the foreigners get first pick on housing started here, and it was started (or at the very least condoned) by our own party.

Rex concludes with a dire warning, tinged with a last hope that the situation can be remedied:

“We have just about ten years to break down our ghettos and to see to it that all men have the same opportunities in education and employment...The difficulties we face do not arise from our ignorance about how the problem should be tackled. They arise from a lack of will or from opportunist electoral fear. Yet trying to placate the electorate with semi-racist policies, or keeping quiet in the hope that you won’t be called a nigger-lover hasn’t paid off, while a deliberate assault on the ghettos with a view to clearing them would eliminate one of the most important of all the secondary causes of racialism.....

“If we can now deal with those problems which are the secondary causes of racialism we may still be able to go on to create an unprejudiced generation”. (p.83).

I have quoted Rex’s early work at length, because it is more than a historical artefact. It is more, even, than an accurate warning of what was to come.

It is, in its honest relaying of the facts about the initial discrimination of the 1950s and 1960s, and its tale of the early development of a totally false but ultimately convincing narrative about how it was and is the white working class who suffer from discrimination, the key to unlocking the door to a post-Glasman future of Labour and race relations.

First, though, before we get stuck into how Labour resolves its core dilemma on race, we need to step forward 10 years or so, the period Rex warned would make or break race relations.

In 1979, John Rex published his magnum opus ‘Colonial Immigrants in a British City: A Class Analysis.’ It is a meticulously detailed account of the ongoing systematic discrimination against Black and Asian people in Britain, and simply for its standard of scholarship I would recommend it to all. For the purposes of this article, however, this is the crucial section:

“All in all, therefore, even though the immigrant generation may express satisfaction with its conditions, there are clear differences of life-chances between them and the white British.....Such differences of life-chances, if they were sustained over a period, would undoubtedly mean that consciousness of a common identity, common exploitation and oppression, and a common conflict with the host society would emerge and find expression in some kind of ethnic-class-for-itself.

“But if this is true for the immigrant generation it is much more true for its children. Some of these have been educated in Britain, and some have broken with their parents to the extent of leaving home altogether, and, in extreme cases, becoming homeless. Not merely is it the case, therefore, that immigrant class-consciousness will be reinforced with time by the mere repetition of the same experiences, but it will also be related to the consciousness which emerges amongst the young who have rising expectations not shared by their parents, and who are likely to be more fiercely frustrated by the experiences of discrimination (p. 208).”

Thus, ten years on from his initial warning, Rex updates his prediction, taking into account his empirical research through the 1970s, including interviews with young Blacks and Asians, more often than not born in Britain but still excluded from significant aspects of it.

Thirty years on from Rex’s updated warning, we can safely say he was right. There *are* large sections of the British population who now, because their grandparents or even great grandparents were immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s, feel and act as though they are excluded from “mainstream” British society.

A powerful self-reinforcing process has taken hold in the last forty years, and the actuality of physical exclusion has been reinforced by a narrative of defensive, and at times, aggressive isolationism. What two generations ago Rex described as a retreat into “safe enclosed and protected communities” (p.132) *has* become – in a number of towns and cities – the ghetto culture Rex warned us we would produce. The powerlessness of the new arrivals in the 1960s to resist discrimination has been replaced by a powerful ethnic-class-for-itself, developed to defend itself against the white-class-for-itself, which in turn was the creation of a Labour government unable or unwilling – for whatever reason – to defy the Tories’ racialist onslaught.

Of course there are exceptions, and many of them. Large numbers of young Black and Asian men and women have stepped beyond the housing, educational and employment restrictions placed upon their parents, and have made use, either actively or passively, of the anti-discriminatory legislation introduced between the 1970s and the 1990s as a way of mitigating some of the worst effects of the systemic disadvantage visited upon their parents. Yet these people, many though they now are, are still a relative exception.

Just as it is woefully inadequate for both James Purnell and Anthony Painter, in their somewhat off-beat contributions to the e-book, to argue that an aspiration to working class solidarity is an irrelevance on the basis that some people 'escape' their roots, so it is misleading to say that the effects of racial discrimination are no longer felt, just because a large number of Asian and Black people do not experience active discrimination in their daily lives.

And while my blogging colleague Carl is correct to argue that extreme Islamism is a personal choice ([Packman 2011](#)), and that it is condescending to the point of "colonial: to suggest that "Islamism is somehow the logical extension of western imperialism and homeland racism.....denying the notion that extremists are able to make stupid decisions for themselves", I don't think we can afford to ignore the extent to which the racist structures and systems established 40 years ago, largely under a Labour government, also contribute to the position we find ourselves in today. It is wrong to draw too many conclusions from one event, but it is also hard to ignore the fact that those young people who chose the most extreme path of isolationism on 7th July 2005, were born and bred in towns where restrictive employment and housing opportunities, of the type set out by Rex, were at their most extreme.

Ultimately, revisiting the past in the company of John Rex should help us towards two key conclusions, before we move on to what Labour can and should do about the situation in which we now find ourselves.

First, racial and ethnic disharmony is not an inevitable development in a multi-ethnic society. This may seem like an obvious point to make, but it is an important one to make in the face of a growing emphasis on the Right to portray the current "immigration problem" as a "clash of civilizations", in which good English Christians are prey to a Muslim horde intent on the imposition of sharia law in our fair land (see here, for one such example). While such views are abhorrent, we need to recognise that the rise of the EDL is based, at least in part, on the development of a quasi-intellectual rationale for its thuggery, and we need to be in a position to repudiate these quasi-intellectual outpourings on the basis of historical fact as well as anti-Fasist emotion.

At the same time, we need to be confident enough in our facts to point out that it doesn't have to be this way, and that the first half of the twentieth century provided very clear evidence that it is possible for mass immigration to be followed by a process of harmonious assimilation, where both incoming and existing citizens get the best of both worlds, so long as there is no short term political imperative to get in the way.

Anyone doubting this need read not just the accounts of Labour members and trade unionists taking to Cable Street in defence of their Jewish immigrant neighbours, and in historical contradiction of Glasman's claims that the working class does not adhere to abstract ideals of fairness and justice ([The Guardian, 2006](#)). They might also read the wonderful autobiography of Ian Mikardo, the early chapters of which are devoted to an account of his Yiddish parents' arrival in the East End and his upbringing in Portsmouth – an upbringing seemingly devoid of any family culture/host country tensions and in which the life of a young Rabbinical wannabee merged seamlessly with a very British Labour party activism.

The second conclusion to draw from our brief re-reading of the history of British racial disharmony is that the current racial and ethnic tensions that exist, and which have created the environment for both the rise of British Islamism and the EDL, amongst others, is, NOT the fault of the English working class.

Such a conclusion does two things for us as we seek a way forward from Labour's current impasse. First, it leads us to a position where we can talk openly and honestly about the legacy of discrimination without being labelled first and foremost as - to be repeat Rex's choice 1960s' phrase - a nigger-lover. Secondly, it moves us beyond the position, inherent to Glasman's thesis, that the working class is instinctively, and amorphously, socially conservative, insular and closed to the outside world.

Such a position, as I have suggested, verges on the condescending, removing the proactive agential power that EP Thompson was so keen to evoke in his 'Making of the English Working Class', in favour of an almost fatalistic structuralism, in which the working class will only ever be seen to respond en masse to an environment structured for them by their masters.

As Mike Kenny (one of the contributors to the e-book) suggest in a new paper 'The Political Theory of Recognition: The Case of the White Working Class'(2011), the continued definition of the white working class as an unthinking rump ultimately simply reinforces this stereotyping:

"The potential limitations of this version of 'recognition' politics are multiple. The internal cultural heterogeneity of the white working class, as well as the importance of a strong identification with a sense of locality for many of its members, renders attempts to capture the essence of English cultural traditions in this fashion [cultural policy interventions around 'Englihsness'] largely self defeating. Such interventions risk promoting a conservative and pastiche version of group culutre, recycling stereotypes and potentially reinforcing the kind of Balkanization that can damage the cohesion of communities and neighbourhoods" (p.12).

Instead of reinforcing tensions through attempts to appease in this way, I cotend that 'policy interventions' aimed at identifying the specific events (and those responsible for them) which led to the development of modern day racial and ethnic tensions may empower us all to find a resolution to those tensions.

Truth and reconciliation

What does such a desire to revisit the past, so that we create a different future, mean in practice?

First of all, we should be clear what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that the historical fact-finding and analysis should be restricted to the inclusion of this article as a fresh chapter in the 2nd edition of the e-book. Academic enquiry is all well and good, but something rather more urgent is needed now.

What *is* needed now is for Labour to hold some form of "truth and reconciliation" process - a process where the testimonies victims of Labour's racist policies - both first and second generation - are heard, and those responsible both for the creation of systematic discrimination, and for the 'covering up' of that discrimination are held properly to account.

I recognise, of course, that this sounds overly dramatic; “truth and reconciliation” is what happens in faraway lands, where sometimes unspeakable crimes have been committed, but where the processes of justice have broken down, or are simply overwhelmed by the criminality, to the extent that such special measures need to be developed and sanctioned by the international community as a way to move on from the past.

Yet I make no apologies for setting out what needs to be done in these terms. The injustices that were brought upon the parents and grandparents of people who are now our neighbours *were* significant in the way they have changed the country for the worse, and they have remained ‘unspeakable’ for the simple reason that no-one has yet spoken truthfully, in public, about the effect those injustices have had over the last 50 years.

So while of course any process established by the Labour party will have no legal validity, and while people who come forward to testify, or are called to testify, will do so voluntarily, the ethos of truth and reconciliation should remain – where appropriate, account should be held, and where appropriate apology should be given by the labour movement.

And of course many on the Labour right will react to such a proposal, especially when it comes to be taken out of context with all that precedes it in this article, with incredulity, and the inevitable “loonie lefties” disparagement. The Labour right will argue that for the Labour movement to engage in such a process of its own free will is simply to reinforce that it is Labour, not the Conservatives, who have a problem with “immigration”.

Yet we cannot simply carry on as we are. Currently Labour is caught in the web of its own history, and can only ever offer alternate platitudes about how it is both tough on immigration and on those who won’t integrate, or how it really, really respects people, whatever cultural background they have. It doesn’t wash with the public, and it’s a vote loser whichever line is adopted.

By coming out and accepting some responsibility for what’s gone wrong, through a serious and committed investigation, Labour can change the game. It can become the party that actually cares about racial harmony, while the Conservatives are portrayed as either complacent or mendacious about their own role in the creation of the social incohesions of the early 21st century.

Labour is in a position to do all this now. For whatever motive, the new Labour leadership is keen to portray Labour as engaging in a period of deep reflection about its future, and Glasman and his colleagues have used this space intelligently to push forward their own Blue Labour agenda. We should be grateful for that initiative because, while what Glasman offers is ultimately little more than a surrender to dominant conservative voices, their work does potentially open the door to a more radical review of the party’s ethics based on a reading of history rather than an interpretation of past discourse.

Moreover, Labour needs to engage in this process now, for soon it will be too late. Many of the people who might be called to bear witness - whether they be a West Indian rail employee denied promotion in the late 1950s because of union pressure, or a Cabinet Minister like Roy Hattersley, implicated in the development of the racist White Paper of 1965 – are old people now, and it is important to hear their voice before it is too late.

In terms of the elite decision making processes of the mid-1960s, in particular, we need to remember that this was an age before wall-to-wall political analysis, where Westminster's deeds were generally received normatively as the expressed will of the people through parliament, and the concept of hidden power structures was only just beginning to emerge through the work of people like C Wright Mills (1959); it is noteworthy that John Rex himself, acute observer though he was, expressed his bafflement at the turn of events in 1964-68, unable to comprehend how a Labour government with apparently decent motives in 1964 could have created such a 'catastrophe' of race relations by 1968. In such circumstances, and without recourse to the primary testimony proposed, much of the texture of what really happened may be lost for ever.

In offering up this proposal for some kind of truth and reconciliation process, I also offer my own interpretation of history as a hostage to fortune, or at least to rigorous enquiry. For of course, while I have focused upon Labour's part in the development of the ethnic tensions we experience today, and suggest that an honest appraisal of same should be the start of Labour's renewal in this area, there are bound to be other causes.

First and foremost of these causes, it goes without saying, is the Conservative party's attitudes and behaviour in the 1950s and 1960s. It was the Conservatives not Labour, who created the infamous slogans of the Smethwick byelection, and it was the Conservatives who gave Enoch Powell his platform. The fact that Labour may have caved into this overt racism is important, because that should, I contend, be the initial focus, but it will be equally important to lay blame on the Conservative party if that is justified, especially given the fact that this is not a process the newly 'detoxified' Tories have themselves had the courage or integrity to engage in.

There may be deeper causal forces at play here, too. It is conceivable that the 'primary racism' of Peter Griffiths and Enoch Powell had its roots in the colonial mindset of a post-war Conservative party yearning for lost empire (note that Powell's early ambition was to become Viceroy of India), and that in turn the treatment of Asian and black immigrants as people unworthy of equal treatment is part of the exploitative logic of capitalism (see Keay (2000) for example, on the way the rise of capitalism changed the way in which Westerners viewed the Indian population during the early 19th century).

Likewise, a public inquiry of the type envisaged might profitably investigate not just the prior causes of Labour's racism, but also the way in which when it returned to power in 1997, New Labour seemed to go out of its way to dampen criticism of its new immigration policy by simply keeping it under wraps, up to the point where, in the aftermath of the 7/7 bombings, it chose to adopt the uncomfortable line on immigration and immigrants it still maintains, as reflected both by Blears and Yvette Cooper in their recent utterances referred to above (see also Cotterill 2010 on New Labour's change of policy in 1996).

Notwithstanding these different 'variables', however, I am confident in my own interpretation of events that the primary object of investigation should be Labour's record in the 1960s, alongside its failure to come to terms with the consequences of that record, either in the way initially advocated by John Rex or through any other substantive remedial action.

Ultimately, and as Paul Pierson (2004: 81) has suggested, any political and historical analysis must be clear about its frame of time reference before analysis begins, and this can only ever be on the basis of the best knowledge available. I rest my case, therefore.

Concluding comments

I have set out my case for Labour to initiate a brave and rigorous appraisal - whether or not it is called a truth and reconciliation process is beside the point - of where it went wrong on “immigration”, and why we are where we are. I do so because, as I have already noted, this is an area where Labour has the most intractable problem.

However, I think the broad methodology proposed holds true for other areas. Where and how Labour went wrong on its public attitude to people on welfare, for example, surely deserves a similar level of scrutiny. Space in this article does not permit such an enquiry even to begin

Perhaps most crucial, however, is the question of how and why Labour’s political economy came to be so biased in favour of the interests of capital under the rule of New Labour. Such an investigation, although its very parameters will be fiercely contested, is vital if we are to move properly beyond New Labour. It is not sufficient to acknowledge that New Labour’s embrace of the neoliberal economic model simply happened; we also need to clear how the New Labour hierarchy came to have this power over its membership, and the broader labour movement, in the first place.

My own thesis, set out previously (Cotterill 2010), is that the Labour left was seduced by the easy assurances of 1960s postmodernism, subsequently reflected in the comfortable interest group Labour politics of the 1980s, to the extent that at the crucial period of New Labour’s rise, the real interests of the labour movement, and of the British working class, were set too easily to one side.

But whatever the reasons for the aberrations of New Labour, the important point is that, as a labour movement, our review of what went wrong must not be restricted to the publication of an e-book or two. While we owe Maurice Glasman and his colleagues a vote of thanks for having started the enquiry into Labour’s politics of paradox’, Labour’s business is the business of the public, and must be conducted in public, for better or for worse.

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