

Don't expect too much: what can Conservative experience tell us about how much Labour will change before the next election?

While Labour may currently be leading in the polls, it is less than three years since they were emphatically defeated in the general election. [Tim Bale](#) reflects on this transformation and, drawing on his research into the Conservatives, offers some suggestions as to post-defeat changes which we are still likely to see.



Given Labour's lead in the polls and the Coalition's current difficulties, it is easy to forget that the Labour Party recently suffered one of the worst general election defeats in its history. There has been far less public debate than one might have expected about how (and how much) Labour needs to change in order to regain office. Perhaps, however, we are expecting too much. We often assume that a big defeat will lead automatically to big changes, be they in personnel, in organisation, or in policy. But what if we're wrong?

Political scientists have long been interested in the question of what drives political parties to change who represents them, how they run themselves, and what they stand for. In my new book, *The Conservatives Since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change*, I conduct a full-length study of this question by looking at how and why the Conservatives have changed while in government and in opposition since 1945. What does this research tell us about how much we can expect the Labour Party to have changed by 2015?

Clearly, one cannot simply extrapolate from the Conservative experience and predict precisely what we'll see from Labour since there are important differences between the two parties. That said, however, there are still sufficient similarities between them – indeed between all political parties to make it worth hazarding some educated guesses.

First, we shouldn't imagine that the scale of Labour's defeat (which in any case was mitigated by the Tories' disappointing performance) will necessarily lead to big changes, whether it be in the kind of people who represent the party, the way it organises itself, or the policies it comes up with. This lack of impetus is not likely to be counterbalanced by leadership or factional activism. Ed Miliband – and this is not necessarily a criticism – is simply not that type of leader (at least not yet) and he has been careful to distribute key portfolios across (although not right across) Labour's ideological spectrum rather than simply reward the like-minded. Moreover, anyone hoping that the parliamentary party or the grassroots will prove powerful sources of inspiration and innovation is probably going to be disappointed. For their part, left-leaning think tankers should concentrate on trying to influence the wider climate of opinion rather than wasting their time trying to ensure their pet projects become a centrepieces of (or even a lowly paragraph in) Labour's manifesto.

Least likely to change is Labour's public face – its salesforce, if you like. With a handful of exceptions at the top, those standing for the party will look pretty much (indeed almost exactly) the same as they did going into the last election. Don't expect an influx of working class, private sector workers without a university education any time soon – if ever. And, given turnover at the top tends to be slow, too, don't expect more than the odd new face in and around the leadership.

If, the other hand, there are going to be any organisational changes, then they will almost certainly occur now rather than when or if the party gets back into government. If they do happen, they will probably be well below the radar of most onlookers and focus on campaigning rather than anything else.

There will be a few changes in policy but not that many. The policy review now being coordinated by Jon

Cruddas will doubtless be [fascinating](#), but such exercises traditionally have more to do with signalling change than with shifting substance. David Cameron's policy groups, for instance, made 782 recommendations in total, of which 120 made it into the manifesto (and 88 into the Coalition agreement) – a 'hit rate' of 15 per cent which would be even lower if we were to exclude minor changes from the calculation. Somewhat depressingly for those on the left, we are more likely to see Labour adapt its policy to any institutionalised (and therefore administratively and financially significant) regimes created by Conservative reforms – in particular in education and welfare – than we are to see promises to reverse those reforms.

Overall, the lack of big changes may alarm some who believe that, without them, Labour has no chance of projecting itself as 'new and improved' to a jaded electorate. This might, however, be too pessimistic. For one thing, as Cameron showed when he was Leader of the Opposition, quite a lot (though obviously not quite enough) can be achieved by continually talking about and providing striking visual 'proof' that one's party is changing. For another, parties in opposition often focus on changing policies in order to address the things they feel they got wrong in government and/or to address societal and economic challenges that are widely agreed to be pressing. Two fields which clearly fall into both categories are immigration and the regulation of banking and finance – and one could make a good case as well for including a chronic failure to provide sufficient new housing. Since these subjects are also highly salient with voters, changes here – perhaps packaged around the meme of '[responsible capitalism](#)' - are likely to be worth far more electorally than a raft of more minor alterations. Finally, it makes more sense, at least when a party is trying to win back power, to adapt strategically to the policies of the current government rather than impotently rage against the dying of the light. The time to shape preferences rather than simply accommodate them is in office, not in opposition.

This post is based on an article published in [Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy](#). The full text is available [here](#).

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About the Author

Tim Bale is Professor of Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. *He is the author of The Conservative Party from Thatcher to Cameron (Polity, 2010). His latest book is The Conservatives since 1945: the Drivers of Party Change (Oxford University Press, 2012).*

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