

# Book Review: Justifying New Labour Policy

by Blog Admin

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*Justifying New Labour Policy* presents a detailed empirical analysis of the ideas, language and policy of New Labour. Politicians often appeal to moral principles and arguments in their efforts to win support for new policy programmes. Yet the question of how politicians use moral language has so far been neglected by scholars, and Judi Atkins aims to fill this gap, with chapters on welfare reform, the Iraq war, and ASBOs. Reviewed by **Andrew Crines**.

**Justifying New Labour Policy. Judi Atkins. Palgrave Macmillan. April 2011.**

## Find this book:

Under Ed Miliband's leadership the Labour Party has begun to question its *raison d'être*. Whether it even knows it is another matter. Today's Labour Party is highly divided yet it is striving hard to appear united in the post-New Labour world. The divisions are highlighted with various colours and shades being co-opted to represent various ideological splinters. Black, Blue, Red, and Purple are just a few. Moreover, Next Labour, Reassurance Labour, New Generation Labour, Blue Labour, and now One Nation Labour have been thrown about as possible new directions for a party which increasingly looks uncertain about its identity.

New Labour provided something of an enforced stable environment for electoral gain at the expense of debates and divisions. Under such conditions, Labour members built up frustrations which have now begun to spill over, with only Socialist Labour appearing absent from the debate. Such was the victory of the Third Way that the Left are the Croslandite social democrats of old, and the Right now comfortable confirming a Disraelite tradition as Labour's future.

In this environment it is unclear how the Labour Party will be able to present itself with a clear vision in 2015. With such an uncertain future this important and timely book looks again at domestic New Labour policy to see if it can lend the current generation ideological wisdom. **Judi Atkins'** thematic approach and theoretical framework provide a thorough interrogation of various policies; these being welfare, the human rights act, anti-social behaviour, and the defining impact of the Iraq War upon the New Labour project. Texturing these is a repositioning of Labour as a force for moral individualism *vis-à-vis* "New Labour's core concept of equal worth was decontested as the moral equality of all individuals, regardless of such contingent factors as their gender, age, ethnicity, or sexuality" (p.84).

The author rightly goes on to argue that such intellectual weight draws more from liberal than socialist traditions because of a clear rejection of equality of outcome in favour of equality of opportunity. This is hardly surprising given the declining influence of traditional socialism in the Labour Party, both at constituency and Parliamentary levels since 1982.

By applying such a philosophical perspective upon the four areas under review, the author argues that New Labour essentially 'made work pay' by providing social welfare for the price of genuine participation on the part of the individual. The perception of endless universalism would be replaced by a commitment from both sides (individual and state) that a role had to be played for social welfare to actually prove beneficial.



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In terms of the human rights act, the author argues this was an attempt by New Labour to ensure the British citizenry benefitted from rights under the ECHR. To do this, incorporation into the UK's legal system was seen as a fundamental part of ensuring British individual rights were in line with the European social democratic model.

Again with anti-social behaviour, individual responsibility was key. This negated more structural factors which may contribute, for which New Labour can be critiqued. Yet across these three domestic spheres the author emphasises the importance of the individual over the state, which to some extent became relegated.

The Iraq War stands apart in the book for its more distinctive character. This is because it was justified using a different part of New Labour ideology connected to the Blair Doctrine and the changing circumstances in international relations compelled by 9/11. The author argues that the Iraq War was for Blair justifiable and compatible with the Doctrine because it “echoed the enlightened notion of self-interest that underpinned New Labour’s conception of community” (p.163). Put simply, the individualism that underscored New Labour’s approach to domestic policy can legitimately be extended to the international community in a way that implies intervention. As a result, Britain was compelled to remove Saddam because he was a retardant element in ensuring those interests on the international stage. This is, of course, a matter of substantial debate yet the author argues this is how the Third Way interpreted international relations.

The book concludes that success in these arenas should be measured asymmetrically. Although many of the liberal undercurrents informed these areas, their success rates were by no means universal. Of those, the author argues that “perhaps the most successful of New Labour’s argumentative strategies was its case for the New Deals”, which aimed to alleviate social concerns in the UK. This suggests the New Deal may still have relevance for One Nation Labour. In the other areas the author suggests New Labour may have been less successful; however, given the defining nature of the Iraq War, it is singled out for its controversial impact. Indeed, the drive to war may have been informed more by ideology and less about military intelligence, which for the author undermined Blair’s credibility and with it the entire New Labour project. This makes any wholesale return to New Labour highly problematic in the current Labour Party, even if some of the ideas remain of value.

The strength of this book is certainly that it provides the current Labour Party with a clear moral argument for and against New Labour policy. The book also provides an appropriately objective assessment, even when discussing topics which politicians and commentators may themselves be passionate about. Such a disconnect is necessary for any academic book, and this certainly is neither sympathetic nor condemning of the material. Indeed, the book is thoroughly intellectually located and uses a valid research approach. However, a caveat must be the inclusion of the Iraq War. Whilst the author clearly makes a strong case for inclusion, it cannot be denied that the main focus of the book is on domestic policy. This presents the reader with a slightly left field step, justified only by the author connecting them ideologically. Had the book included a chapter on Sierra Leone, then it may have been more balanced in terms of its studies. However this should not detract from what is a highly interesting and valuable book for any scholar of British politics.

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