

'The ghost of Keir Hardie': Nostalgia and the modern Labour Party

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While the deployment of Keir Hardie nostalgia has often proven to be an effective means by which to secure internal support and increase political capital within the Labour Party, it has proven to be much less successful in connecting at an emotional level with the wider British electorate, writes [Richard Jobson](#).



With the hundredth anniversary of Keir Hardie's death approaching on 26 September, commentators have, perhaps inevitably, begun to think about the [lessons that can be learnt](#) from Hardie's life and times. Just as important is Hardie's continued resonance within the modern Labour Party's identity. A former coal miner and one of the founders of the Labour Party, he remains a heroic representative symbol of Labour's traditional industrial working-class past.

The nostalgic invocation of memories of Hardie represents a thread that runs throughout the party's post-war history. Aside from Nye Bevan and perhaps Clement Attlee, Hardie has been the historic figure most revered and referenced within the discourse of the Labour Party.

On the one hand, the party's left-wing has often linked the case for public ownership to memories of Labour's pioneers and Hardie in particular. During the post-war era, the letters pages of the left-leaning Tribune magazine were full of requests from party members for the party to reinstate Hardie's political vision in the present. Such sentiments were particularly pronounced during the period in which Labour adopted and advocated its [Alternative Economic Strategy between 1973 and 1983](#). Party members routinely argued that Labour should build 'the New Jerusalem that William Blake wrote about, that Keir Hardie dreamed about, that Michael Foot and Tony Benn now speak about.'

On the other hand, right-wing revisionists have been keen to portray the left's attachments to Hardie and the form of public ownership that he advocated as nostalgic. Such attacks were particularly frequent during the 1950s as Labour suffered three consecutive electoral defeats and appeared out of touch with the British people. In his much cited revisionist text *The Future of Socialism*, Anthony Crosland declared that 'Keir Hardie cannot provide.... the right focus with which to capture the reality of the mid-twentieth-century world.'

Writing at around the same time, the then Gaitskellite MP Desmond Donnelly [noted](#) in an article entitled 'Laying the Ghost of Keir Hardie' that, 'For the past ten years the Labour Party has been chasing Keir Hardie's ghost. Its hope is to thereby discover what he would do if he were alive today. But-alas-the quest is irrelevant.'

Yet it is overly simplistic to depict nostalgia for Hardie as something that has been deployed by the Labour left and contested by right-wing revisionists. The historical truth is more nuanced. There have been many examples of Labour Party modernisers also attempting to lay claims to Hardie's memory. Partly this has been due to the fact that, in a party that has held such a well-defined nostalgic identity, invocations of the past can represent an effective means by which to mobilise support and secure goals and objectives.

At the height of the 1975 European Economic Community membership debate, Peter Hildrew of *The Guardian* recorded Harold Wilson's frequent references to Hardie and how, at one speech in Scotland, 'it seemed as if the ghost of the founder of the Labour Party was about to appear on the platform and cast the historical weight of the Scottish Working Class tradition in favour of the European Economic Community.' Similarly, Tony Blair was also inclined to resurrect memories of Hardie when he found himself [short of political capital](#).

More recently, during the 2010 Labour Party leadership contest, [David Miliband's Keir Hardie Memorial Lecture](#)

attempted to recast Hardie's memory in a manner more conducive to his own political alignment. Miliband argued that 'Hardie was a socialist not a statist' and a 'realistic radical'. Widely seen as the most effective speech during the 2010 contest, Jon Cruddas declared it to be ['the most important speech by a Labour politician for many years'](#).

If the instrumental deployment of Hardie nostalgia has often proven to be an effective means by which to secure internal support and increase political capital within the Labour Party itself, then it has proven to be much less successful in connecting at an emotional level with the wider British electorate.

As the twentieth century progressed, Labour's attachment to its traditional industrial working-class origins placed it less and less in tune with the shifting nature of modern Britain. In electoral terms, Hardie's ghost became as problematic for Labour as the Conservative Party's links to the British aristocracy. Writing about the battle between Harold Wilson and Alec Douglas-Home in the build-up to the 1964 General Election, the *New Statesman* described how 'Each is anxious to prove that the other is old-fashioned, clinging nostalgically to ancient party and class shibboleths. Mr Wilson wants to fence Sir Alec within his grouse moor; Sir Alec strives to smother Wilson's scientific eggheads in Keir Hardie's cloth cap.'

This disconnect has partly been due to an issue of collective identity: Labour's unique nostalgia is rooted in the party's traditional industrial working-class past. It is nostalgia for a world that, in social and economic terms, no longer exists.

If, in his first party conference speech in Brighton, the new Leader of the Opposition mobilises a selective Labour nostalgia for Hardie, the sentiments expressed will almost certainly resonate within the conference hall. They are likely to be met with widespread indifference outside of it.

A study of Hardie himself can tell us relatively little about how the party should orientate itself in the present. The fact that his mnemonic ghost still lingers 100 years after his death can teach us considerably more about the modern Labour Party.

About the Author

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