

# What does it mean to be Labour? Understanding the party's ethos

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Particular perspectives influence how individuals think about politics. But how do members and supporters of a single party create a collective perception of its ethos – what it stands for and where its future lies? [Karl Pike](#) examines these concepts in relation to the Labour Party, and explains how ethos can affect political direction.



The Labour Party 'has a life of its own,' [Henry Drucker](#) argued in 1979. Many political commentators, observers, and members of the party will instinctively comprehend this concept of 'ethos': the traditions, beliefs, and folk memories which Drucker believed helped bind and motivate Labour people.

Comprehending what comprises Labour's ethos is aided by [Raymond Williams's work](#) on culture, who suggested people were shaped by a 'structure of feeling': this was 'as firm and definite as "structure" suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity'. With ethos being both structural and constitutive, it provides the lifeblood of institutions and actors, yet has the capacity to interact and change over time as new generations arrive.

## Ties that bind, with some important disputes

Labour people have different understandings of the party's ethos, and these affect their views and actions with regard to its political direction. Depending on their relative strength, these alternative understandings can affect the dominant ethos at a given time. Yet, while Labour's ethos can be affected by actors, there exists a dominant ethos at which can act as both a constraint and an enabler; it affects what is and isn't possible for the direction of the party. This dominant ethos has a structural effect, with perceptions of it being particularly important.

In utilizing this concept, it is necessary to consider the different comprehensions of Labour's ethos. These can be seen through four central debates around what Labour's ethos entails. Broadly, these are:

- **Socialist theory and the Labour method:** The role of intellectual activity and theoretical work, to underpin how Labour thinks and governs, is subject to different interpretation and prioritization among Labour people.
- **The 'grey area' – when doctrine becomes faith:** Connected, but separate to debates about theoretical underpinning, is a debate about the line between particular policy and the party's mission in Labour's ethos. This sees, across the doctrinal spectrum, policy become more akin to faith.
- **The Parliamentary Labour Party as leaders and as delegates:** Closely linked to policy discussions are debates about the role of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). While tensions between parliamentarians and 'the grassroots' are not unique, the singularity within the Party is the relative bellicosity on both sides that stems from a question of organisational ethos: are Members of Parliament delegates of the movement, and no more?
- **The 'Parliamentary paradox' – an 'outsiders' party and an 'insiders' party:** This debate includes the tendency of 'them and us'. Labour's traditions posit an 'outsiders' party. This comprehension of Labour's ethos at the top of the party had weakened over the decades, but has made a very recent comeback.

Taking the role of theoretical debate as an example, an extensive vocabulary exists within Labour's mental universe that divides it into two broad camps – theoretical socialists and practical socialists. As Ben Pimlott [wrote](#) of Wilson's opinions on Tony Crosland and Roy Jenkins, 'he saw Crosland... as a philosopher or, in his own terms, a socialist

theologian, and Jenkins as a man of letters and practical policies. The Prime Minister was an empiricist, intellectually as well as politically', therefore favouring Jenkins.

The theoretical and the practical are consistently raised by Labour politicians and engaged observers of Labour politics. Its regularity emphasises its place in Labour's traditions and folklore, having become a part of how Labour people interpret the party's ethos, and what it is to be Labour. For example, the '[essentially non-theoretical Mr Wilson](#)', who displayed 'the habitual Labourist contempt for theory' though being, in the hopeful New Left appraisal of the early 60s Wilson, '[far more theoretical... than any previous leader](#)'; or the recollection from former Deputy Leader, Roy Hattersley, that: 'Many people in the Labour Party think ideology is a waste of time... Jim Callaghan would say about ideas, "what we need to do is obvious, you don't need to have theory".'

### **Corbyn's Labour**

As Owen Smith's 2016 leadership challenge demonstrated, a left-wing policy platform does not bring a Labour person close to Corbyn's ethos. Jeremy Corbyn has shown – admittedly, through a sharply curtailed pre-election tenure – limited interest in providing Labour with a theoretical underpinning. His rhetoric emphasises a moral certainty, based on long-held positions that are more akin to faith. On the role of the PLP, Corbyn considers parliamentarians to be delegates of Conference and the movement, though as a recent [Guardian editorial](#) pointed out, this can rub up against his commitment to policy as faith, for example with Trident.

Perhaps the most commented-upon aspect of the Corbyn Labour ethos is his interpretation of Labour as an 'outsiders' party. He thrives outside of Westminster. The focus of his most loyal followers is not electoral triumph, but political and organisational transformation. In many ways, this interpretation rejects the 'compromise' of parliamentary socialism, feeding off, as it does, the perception of New Labour's management of a conservative country.

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