

# New Labour and after: the toxic consequences of cynical party management

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*The New Labour years saw sweeping cultural change designed to replace the traditional internal Labour party democracy with a new organisational culture. Its effects are still felt today. **Emmanuelle Avril** explains how the struggles in today's Labour have their roots in Blair's brand of party management and Labour's continuing (dys)function as an organisation.*



Management in political parties is unavoidable. Like any other organisation, a party needs to coordinate its activities and to engineer organisational cohesion so as to achieve what its leadership wants. But in the case of New Labour, this dimension took a new and distinctive turn, taking precedence over all other functions – and resulting in what Lewis Minkin has described in *The Blair Supremacy* as a “rolling coup”, a wave of changes designed to take full control of the organisation.

The elements of New Labour's change management strategy were dressed up in an official discourse of “democratisation”. The reforms were said to aim at establishing a direct relationship between the leadership and the members – doing away with routines dismissed as archaic, so as to create a “vibrant” party which would attract new categories of members. But New Labour's ethics of delivering to the leader rather than to the party led to the extensive use of procedural fixes, the “professionalisation” of the party and greater politicisation of national and regional party staff. This was underpinned by a culture change with Blair – and those around him – developing a specific attitude and behaviour which reflected their self-perception as an elite imbued with a moral superiority that justified all the fixing.

In practice, most decisions were removed from the formal decision-making arena of the annual conference, through the creation of policy forums where discussions were supposed to bring about a more “consensual” approach. Despite initial hopes, it became clear that the new procedures were designed so as to ensure that the “correct” results would emerge. Generally the new processes translated into mere consultation exercises that had no real impact on policy formulation. Overall, New Labour's style of management can be defined as a form of top-down, command-and-control “over-management”. It amounted to a pattern of self-reinforcing practices, which led to counterproductive outcomes.

Indeed, what is most puzzling is how much the New Labour management reforms can be seen to have failed to achieve their main goals. The counter-intuitive effects of change management are well known, but what is distinctive in the case of New Labour is that this specific party management approach appears to have been intrinsically self-defeating, as reforms designed to increase control often resulted – when implemented – in loss of control. Attempts to “democratise” the party and establish more direct relationships between the leadership and a larger, supposedly less radical and more docile grassroots base often backfired spectacularly, and ended up benefitting internal opponents of New Labour – as the election of Jeremy Corbyn demonstrates.

There are several explanations for this. One problem was the party leadership’s unshakeable belief that their views and those of voters were the same. The trade unions and Constituency Labour Parties were thought to be at odds with how voters felt. They therefore needed to be contained. But when constituency delegates were sometimes persuaded to vote in ways which went counter to the wishes of the wider membership, the leadership in effect cut itself off from grassroots feedback. Indeed, sometimes it was the leadership which was at odds with public sentiment.

That was because their efforts to control the grassroots were based on a misconception of local parties and members, who were seen as dangerous radicals who would thwart the modernisers’ ambition to make the party more responsive to more moderate voters. However, the rare empirical studies which have investigated the supposed ideological gap between Labour members and Labour voters had shown it to be a matter of degree rather than of a real divergence of opinions.

Finally, even though Blair is usually regarded as a “dominant” leader by virtue of his force of personality, popular appeal and the very favourable conditions he enjoyed at the start of his premiership, he failed to consolidate his position and was eventually forced by a distrustful parliamentary party to step down at a time not of his own choosing. New Labour’s command and control approach, which was supposed to strengthen Blair’s position, is likely to generate powerful counter-movements.

Beyond the well-documented dwindling organisational vitality and the toxification of the party’s image, a major and much less visible consequence of New Labour’s party management was the loss of a critical mind. The model which Minkin defined as “wilful blindness” and which is referred to in the field of organisational studies as “[skilled unawareness](#)” describes in-group of people who overrate their ability to make the right decisions, who are in denial of any discrepancies, are not able to see the warning signs, and who tend to blame any failures on external factors. This behaviour results in a dysfunctional decision-making process reminiscent of Irving Janis’s famous exposition of “groupthink”.

When group members have literally learned not to learn, errors are no longer apparent and the systematic response to emerging problems is a reckless decision to press on in the wrong direction. Indeed, a key manifestation of New Labour party management is the way the modernisers were trapped in a self-protective outlook: the problems with Blair’s leadership were never raised, despite mounting evidence of poor decision-making.

An organisational culture which deems the loyalty and compliance of team members its cardinal values fatally curtails a party’s ability to learn and to evolve. The post-Blair Labour Party, where lack of charisma in leaders seems to have become a virtue, bears the hallmarks of this legacy, in a way which recalls the predicaments of the post-Thatcher Conservative Party. [Accounts](#) of Ed Miliband’s excessive reliance on a very small circle of trusted allies and of his tendency to interpret any criticism as a sign of disloyalty seem to confirm that the organisational reflexes acquired in the New Labour years are very difficult to shake off.

Even though they are poles apart in terms both of ideology and style, the parallels between Blair and Corbyn are striking. Regardless of their respective agendas in supporting the opening up of party structures, both have claimed to revitalise the party by promoting “a new kind of politics”, seeking to do away with conventional forms of party organising and promoting instead community empowerment. Both seem to be blind to the toxic impact their party management has on the party’s electoral appeal, and feel sustained by the legitimacy conferred to them by

procedures which bypass the traditional power brokers in the party.

The rise and demise of the New Labour brand shows that lack of respect for due process, emphasis on short-term success, and rule bending all have a short-term as well as long-term cost. Management processes – the rules and procedures an organisation follows – are more than mere technicalities. They affect the party's image and reputation in ways which reverberate beyond the boundaries of the organisation and which affect the way the party engages with voters. Rule-bending leads to a loss of trust internally and externally, reinforcing voters' negative perception of political elites.

*This post is based on 'The (Unintended) Consequences of New Labour: Party Leadership vs Party Management in the British Labour Party.' Politics and Governance, 2016, New Approaches to Political Leadership, 4, pp. 5-14. It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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