

New Labour and Equality: A Response to Hickson

Firstly, I would like to thank Kevin Hickson for his thoughtful reply to my article and the important points he makes concerning the general theme(s) of the paper (Meredith, 2006). The general thrust of his response is one that has been central to arguments over the relative social democratic credo of New Labour and the degree of continuity between so-called ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Labours – that is, respective understandings and applications of equality, and particularly the commitment of the latter to a general standard of equality established by the father of ‘moderate’ social democracy, Tony Crosland.

However, Hickson abstracts just one of a number of related themes of the original piece on which to focus his response – namely, the apparently explicit differences in conceptions of equality of New Labour and Crosland and his ‘unrepentant’ band of ‘traditional social democrats’. He largely ignores the important related points addressed in the article that the social democratic critique of New Labour underplays the *revisionist* and pragmatic aspects of Crosland’s thinking and the fact that often, in practice, his approach to equality and the pursuit of social justice was tempered by his sensitivity to the limits of economic circumstances and needs of a dynamic economy. Neither did Crosland come close to believing in equality of outcome. The disincentive effects of a move to ‘complete equality of wealth’ would be untenable. He believed that inequalities should be tackled not in a ‘bull-headed’ way, ‘but with circumspection, bearing soft on those which are relevant to growth and efficiency and hard on those which are not’ (Crosland, 1962, 28-9). There is an argument to suggest that views of Crosland’s conception of equality are misconceived. There is a tendency to think that Crosland and fellow revisionists embraced something closer to equality of outcome than opportunity. While they were careful to distance themselves from the notion of pure meritocracy on the basis that it only created an alternative form of social division, ‘the suspicion is that [it was] much nearer equality of opportunity than...outcome’ (see Fielding, 2002, 68-70). There is also a misconceived belief that the views of Crosland, the revisionist, remained constant in all circumstances. Although he did not go to the ‘Jenkinsite’ extreme of warning of the potential breach of the ‘frontiers of social democracy’, he was certainly more circumspect about the

limits and uses of public expenditure from the early 1970s. The optimistic and universalistic mood of his original defining tract appears to have dissipated by 1974, when he wrote that ‘we must ruthlessly select priorities. We must prepare in advance a limited programme of radical measures which do not promise more than we can actually perform’ (Crosland, 1974, 53-9; 1976; Lipsey, 2001; Williams, 2002).

Ultimately, it was never quite clear what Crosland meant by the pursuit of ‘greater equality’ and whether there was a standard of equality to be applied in all circumstances. There is always the suspicion that this has been retrospectively ‘clarified’ by ‘traditional social democrats’ in their own image. Given that both Crosland and previous Labour governments (of which he was a prominent member) were ultimately cautious in their pursuit of egalitarian values/ends (see Bale, 1999, viii, 3), there is a case to be made for New Labour’s egalitarian record within the context of particular dilemmas and parameters. Sometimes sterile theoretical arguments over precise meanings of equality conceal the reality of the practice of equality in redistributive policies. It is also a hazardous business of comparing philosophies and politics unconditionally across time and space. New Labour has demonstrated clear redistributive principles and commitment to social expenditure within the context of the political demands of economic growth and efficiency. As Dick Leonard (2002), Parliamentary Private Secretary to Crosland in the early 1970s, has suggested, he attached exceptional importance to the principle of equality but recognised the complexity of translating it into practical policies. Redistribution was much easier and less painful with a large and growing national cake than with a small one. He would have approved of both Brown’s public spending and redistributive commitments and management of a strong, productive economy.

It remains unclear whether Hickson properly appreciates the implications of the different context in which traditional values have to be applied, which inevitably leads to some reconfiguration of core concepts or at least some rethinking about their relationship to other important concepts. A new preoccupation with issues of personal freedom and the balance between equality and liberty in social democratic thought and practice from the mid-1970s was part of a wider sea change in political ideas and priorities. It appears to have created a less obvious environment for the subsequent pursuit and application of traditional egalitarian values and policies than the more

conducive conditions of hegemonic welfare social democracy in the 1950s, which provided the contextual framework of Crosland's major work of theoretical analysis.

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