

Labour's historical nature

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Rejoice, rejoice! To the great relief of all users of social media, voting ends today for the Labour party's national executive committee, as well as for the national policy forum and police commissioner candidates. There's been a lot of chatter about 'factions' and 'slates' during the campaign. As usual, there have been two slates, one representing the leftwing of the Labour party, and one the centre-right of the Labour party, as well as various 'independents'. Although they have gone by many names, in every NEC election since 1900 there have been 'slates' – groups of like-minded people with similar politics who stand on a common platform, support each other and seek to win seats on the NEC together. Usually these have broken down into left versus right.

The role of 'slates' is much misunderstood. I [wrote yesterday](#) on LabourList about the GMB's attempts to purge Progress. This has been part of a wider bid to attack 'factions' and 'slates'. Remember the despicable forgery – worthy of MI5 – which was circulated anonymously a few months ago attacking Progress? It was meant to look like it had come from the hard left (but probably didn't). I've also heard plenty of people argue that slates are divisive, and 'we're all Labour' and everyone should get along and play nicely.

This fails to understand the nature of the Labour party. Under first past the post, political parties are huge coalitions of broad interests. Sheltering under the Labour party's umbrella are traditions and ideologies which under proportional representation would have their own separate parties. Labour is famously a broad church, and like all churches, given to theological disputes and schisms. Some might be as absurd and obscure as whether angels can dance on the end of a pin, or the Big-Endian/Little-Endian disputations in Swift. Others matter a great deal.

Let's think of a few issues:

Britain's membership of the EU;

Israel-Palestine;

The electoral system for the House of Commons;

The Iraq war;

The role of the private sector in delivering NHS healthcare;

The laws governing industrial disputes;

The future composition of the House of Lords;

Same-sex marriage;

All-women shortlists.

Like you, I have strong views about all of the above, and if you buy me a drink I'll tell you what they are. If you were to list your position on each of the above, can you honestly say there is another Labour party member who thinks precisely the same? Even within the Bevin-Healey-Kinnock-Blair tradition in which Progress sits, there are fierce disputes over policy. It is a nonsense to suggest everyone in the Labour party agrees with everyone else. It is a bigger nonsense to claim to speak on behalf of 'the members' when the members have opposing and disparate views on just about everything. That's why we need slates, so candidates can form a common platform, and give the Labour membership an honest choice based on policy.

The Labour party was united by an idea – that working men and women should have their own party in parliament; but it was created by a coalition of organisations, not individuals. These organisations included small trades unions, representing different industrial crafts and trades, from cigar-making to French polishing. They included the major industrial unions from the coalmines, cotton mills, ironworks and shipyards. But they also included groups of socialists, including the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour party and the Fabian Society.

Each of these groups – factions, if you will – brought different ideas to the table. The unions brought practical demands to improve conditions in the workplace. The Fabians dreamt up the welfare state. The ILP brought an evangelical approach to tackling injustice and poverty. Into the mighty tributary of Labour flowed liberalism, Fabianism, trade unionism, cooperation, Guild Socialism, Christianity, environmentalism, feminism and Marxism. Thus from the very start, the Labour party was a coalition of different interests and ideas, often in conflict with one another. You could not join 'the Labour party' until 1918 – you had to be a member of an affiliated organisation first.

I was struck while rereading Kenneth Harris' magisterial biography of Clement Attlee by the factionalism he encountered in the East End at the start of his political career. Returning from the trenches, Attlee sought to become mayor of Stepney. Harris writes:

'As a school for a future Labour leader, destined later to preside over a coalition of often conflicting attitudes and interests, the mayoralty of Stepney could not have been bettered. The main cause of the troubles was the friction between the Irish and the Jews ... the Irish were trade unionists whose attitudes to politics was empirical; they thought of themselves as "Labour". The Jews were individualistic workers, sometimes owning their own small shops; yet they were more doctrinaire in their politics; they thought of themselves as "Socialist". The ILP men, largely English, thought the Irish too conservative and the Jews too doctrinaire.'

Read any of the histories of our party – Geoffrey Foot's *The Labour Party's Political Thought*, *The House the Left Built* by Michael Hatfield, *The Battle for the Labour Party* by Kogan & Kogan, Patrick Seyd's *Rise and Fall of the Labour Left*, or Dianne Hayter's *Fightback! Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s* – and you will see an alphabet soup of initials. CDS, LSC, ILP, LCC, LRC, CLPD, NOLS, CLV, RFMC, IWC, SO and on and on. Add to these the groupings around charismatic figures (the Bevanites, Gaitskellites, Kinnockites, Bennites, and Blairites), the ginger groups supporting electoral reform, Europe or disarmament, the women's organisations, the ethnic and country-based organisations ('Labour Friends of Bangladesh' etc) and of course the affiliated trade unions, and you can see the history of the Labour party is the history of its factions.

This doesn't mean you should exercise or excuse sectarianism. It certainly doesn't mean that other political parties – those belonging to the Fourth International, for example – should be given free rein to infiltrate Labour. It does mean that Labour people from different traditions, with different views, can have a rigorous, healthy debate. It's what makes politics enjoyable.

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