

Introduction

May 1997: The mildness of a beautiful spring day makes the excitement gripping Britain palpable. After eighteen years of Conservative government—twelve of them under the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher—the British are about to vote for the Labour Party, or rather New Labour. The suspense is short-lived; a landslide gives the young leader Tony Blair and his team a massive majority. The euphoria lasts late into the night and everyone is hoping for the advent of the “cool Britannia” promised by the new prime minister.

May 2007: The heroes are weary. The Blair government is suffering the consequences of the war in Iraq, while criticisms abound, provoked by the crisis of the National Health Service and the authoritarian drift that is transforming the country into “cruel Britannia.” The party that claimed to restore honesty in politics is reeling from a police investigation into a case of corruption involving New Labour’s leaders and Tony Blair’s closest colleagues. Already weakened by the announcement of his departure in the course of his third term, the prime minister, in September 2006, has been forced to announce his retirement early the next year. He has thus lost much of his authority. With Blair’s departure in June 2007, the hour has come for balance sheets.

For ten years, the New Labour governments represented a genuine project of social change and demonstrated an exceptional capacity for implementing reforms. Given the electoral system in Britain (majoritarian, with

a single round in one-member constituencies), the winning party can usually count on an absolute majority in the House of Commons, which allows it, with the support of about one-third of the electorate, to form a strong, stable government. The activism of the New Labour governments cannot be understood without taking into account the sizable majorities obtained in 1997 and 2001. The party, which had never proved capable of retaining power for two consecutive terms, won three successive electoral victories, guaranteeing it a supremacy in Parliament (in the House of Commons) superior to that ever obtained by the Conservatives. Their scale insulated the Blair governments against internal rebellions or attacks from the opposition. Furthermore, New Labour benefited from the ongoing weakness of the Conservative Party, which was ideologically divided, lacking a large parliamentary cohort—it was reduced to a parliamentary group of 167 MPs (members of Parliament), the lowest since 1907—and incapable for many years of effectively performing its role of opposition.

The “Blair decade” gives us a significant retrospect to analyze the actions and some of the results of the New Labour governments. A new government always announces numerous reforms, a radical change in a short space of time. Observers scrutinize the actions of ministers and MPs; they emphasize the role of courageous, visionary governments. They reveal the stage-managing of “decisions” that create historic moments that are supposed to change the course of public policy. This heroic version almost invariably derives from an illusion, a spotlight focused on a particular moment in a longer, more complicated process; on a man or woman caught up in careers, networks, interests, and institutions.

Public policies change less readily than slogans. Innovations are often assemblages of existing programs, sometimes disguised by new names. Change in public policy is often incremental,¹ because any new government inherits a civil service, a budget, and institutions that constrain its actions. Although, after eighteen years of opposition, Labour was impatient to demonstrate its capacity for change, analysis of the legacy is indispensable to assess the profundity of the changes made.

The disputed balance sheet of the Labour governments is generally subject to three rather contrasting interpretations (Hassan, 2007); we shall sug-

TABLE 1
Results of Elections to the House of Commons

Year	Turnout (%)	Labour vote	Labour MPs seats		Difference*
		(%)	(no.)	(%)	
1997	71.3	44	418	63.6	178
2001	59.4	40.7	412	62.5	166
2005	61.4	35.2	355	55	66

*Difference between the number of Labour seats and those of the Opposition.

gest a fourth.² The first interpretation stresses the reformist work of the Blair governments, in continuity with the reforms undertaken during the two major periods of Labour government—that is, the Attlee governments (1945–51), marked by the creation of the National Health Service; and the Wilson governments (1964–70, and then 1974–76, although Jim Callaghan remained Labour prime minister until 1979). Continuing the Labour tradition, the Blair governments modernized the party and the country by pursuing Labour’s traditional goals: economic growth, job support, redistribution, investment in public services, and, more generally, pursuit of a progressive political agenda as regards morals and the protection of minorities. Labour, which from the outset was reformist, has always had ambiguous relations with employers, the City of London,³ the establishment, and the economy. Its reforming zeal often encountered difficulties that can be explained in part by its relationship to the state,⁴ the monarchy and its institutions, and the absence of a revolutionary tradition. In addition, others stress that the closing stages of Labour governments have always terminated in bitter criticisms from the left, an exodus of activists from the party, a very mixed record, long periods in opposition . . . and, a few decades later, rehabilitation of the reformist record (Gamble, 2007).

By contrast, a second interpretation casts Tony Blair and his governments as gravediggers of the Labour Party, consolidators of the results of Thatcherism, and the most rabid defenders of market mechanisms. After 1994, Tony Blair renamed his party and imposed a redefinition of collective objectives.⁵ Following Thatcher, the Blair governments strengthened the strong state and the market economy⁶—that is, the mobilization of the

resources of a centralized, sometimes authoritarian state in order to reform, to strengthen the logic of competition and create a British *homo economicus*, rational, egoistic, competitive, and adapted to the implacable logic of the globalized economy. On the other hand, they abandoned any strong discourse on equality, the role of the public sector, or social-democracy.

A third reading, favored by the actors themselves, alludes to a “Third Way”—an alternative to the *modus operandi* of both Old Labour and the Conservatives. This interpretation of the New Labour revolution stresses the modernization of the means but not the goals of the British left, insisting on the originality and significance of the reforms and the unprecedented electoral success of the Blair governments. It highlights the original doctrine of the Third Way, theorized by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens: it rejects socialism and capitalism and insists on novel constraints on public action in a world dominated by the logics of globalization and technological revolution, the advent of the knowledge society. Blair’s “way” is said to derive from new work on governance that goes beyond hierarchies and the traditional civil service (Rhodes, 1996; Le Galès, 2006)—that is, the role of networks, partnerships, cooperatives, new tools of public action, as well as the doctrine of communitarianism (Bevir, 2005). New Labour presented themselves as pragmatists, radical centrists concerned with the efficiency of public action, haunted by the constant requirement to modernize Britain so as to meet the challenges of globalization. This interpretation, rooted in ideas, has been somewhat sidelined: since 2001, New Labour has abandoned any reference to the Third Way.

In this work, we propose a fourth interpretation that insists on the composite and original character of the model. It is based not on the ideology of Tony Blair and his teams, but on their actions, on the policies that have been implemented and on their impact on British politics and society. A decade is a long time in politics, making it possible to perceive inflexions and dynamics. We seek to clarify the contours of the New Labour project, deemed complex by commentators, and to dispel the perplexity created by the activism of the Blair governments (Lewis, 2003). New Labour is indeed a hybrid of economic liberalism inspired by American reforms, the legacy of English-style social-democracy, illiberal policies in the political sense

(that is, those that coerce individuals), and openness or democratization, the whole being seasoned by a marked taste for experimentation.

Three points, which will be at the center of this work, seem essential to us for the purposes of drawing up this balance sheet.

(1) An inscription in history and a desire to transform, to act on British society.

The New Labour elites are profoundly marked by history. They want to be modernizers who are going to adapt the country to a new “historical phase” (“new times”) marked by globalization. New Labour thus displays a rather linear conception of history, of which they are also the agents. Changes are regarded as ineluctable. What is at stake is seizing, even anticipating, the opportunities for development that they create, in order to possess influence on the international stage and master economic constraints. The systematic program for “modernizing” Britain, be it the party, the state, the economy, or society, has been developed without any qualms, because it was presented as a response to the inexorable globalization of the economy. As Anthony Giddens has written, “[T]he world doesn’t owe us anything.”

Modernization is a portmanteau word, which for New Labour is at once an imperative, an aspiration, an injunction, and a description of their political actions (Finlayson, 2003). They are not content to accept the Thatcherite inheritance; they regard economic globalization and the need for sound economic management as a *fait accompli*. It is necessary to adapt to a world that is changing ineluctably and irremediably. Lack of change is synonymous with regression. Only modernization, defended by Blair in messianic tones,⁷ makes it possible to maintain a competitive advantage in a knowledge economy. Its content is rather vague, but it generally involves the use of new technologies, the need for permanent training throughout life and flexibility in the job market and individual careers, the adoption of managerial modes from the private sector, and privileging competition and individual incentives. In speeches, public policy, and public relations, the invocation of modernization becomes the open sesame that simultaneously differentiates and identifies. It allowed Tony Blair to denounce the forces of conservatism in the Labour Party (those who accept neither the

organizational changes nor the new policy directions), and in the country (those who want to preserve their privileges and thereby prevent the opening up of multiple opportunities to deserving individuals), without really justifying the concrete content of his proposals.

Taking account of history ultimately translates into accepting the Conservative legacy and the failures of the Labour Party. The New Labourites retain a bitter memory of the economic difficulties of previous Labour governments, especially those of Wilson and Callaghan. In the 1970s, Britain experienced a profound crisis. It was regarded as the sick man of Europe. The appeal to the International Monetary Fund in 1976, during an unprecedented financial crisis, or the countless strikes culminating in the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978–79, served as a brutal indication of the decline that the country was undergoing.⁸ These failures made the Conservative victory possible.

While the project pursued by Margaret Thatcher aroused no enthusiasm, alternative solutions failed. The Conservative governments offered the British a way out of crisis based on the idea of the superiority of market mechanisms to a contested public sector that was performing poorly. The appeal to return to the model of a less interventionist but more efficient state, to the dynamism and effort of individuals and families at the expense of public-sector trade unions and bureaucracy, to the restoration of British greatness, resonated with the population. The Thatcher governments combined a strong ideological orientation with tactical and pragmatic implementation. They created new tools for developing a more centralized government. New Labour inherited a Britain that had been profoundly transformed, especially by privatization. Any return to the past was impossible. For Labour to get back into power, the public had to be persuaded that the party had changed; and to do that, the activists had to be persuaded to change.

(2) A mobilization of the state in the direction of a bureaucratic revolution that prioritizes the relationship between state, individual (consumer-citizens), and communities at the expense of intermediate organizations and bodies. Political activity organized around the desire to persuade, to win over.

Tony Blair and his teams reinforced an original conception of the state, different from the social-democratic version that privileges public-sector

intervention, universal benefits, and close relations with trade unions. Even so, they were not supporters of a neoliberalism aiming for a retreat of the state. Quite the reverse, they mobilized the state to carry out reforms and change behavior. The Blair governments were extraordinarily active, even activist. They succeeded in introducing a remarkable number of reforms despite opposition and resistance. Blair and his ministers took risks. They engaged tirelessly, in order to explain, to justify, to arrive at compromises, to make assessments. Public policy involves choosing clienteles and victims. Tony Blair and his team never concealed the extent of the pressure that the state must exert in order to transform society, nor the importance of “difficult choices.” Blair did not defend an enchanted vision of the world involving governance without coercion; he demonstrated a remarkable ability to mobilize resources and props for incessant reform. But such activism did not prevent some bitter setbacks. Ultimately, the ambition of social engineering to improve society, and reliance on the best research in the social sciences (especially economics) and on empirically proven facts, recall Nordic social-democracy.⁹ Taking account of experts and stakeholders (those with a “stake” in the affair) was supposed not only to indicate what people want but also to suggest the technical measures to be taken to respond to their demands.

The reform program was carried out by mobilizing and developing the government’s capacity for control and leadership. Preserving and adapting the framework bequeathed by the Conservatives, modernizing the utilitarian legacy (no trust in society), New Labour systematically reformed government and the ways in which it operates. The Blair governments massively increased the centralization of Britain, by granting more autonomy to individuals and organizations within a system of strengthened constraints and controls—a sophisticated system of what Michel Foucault would have called “conducting conduct”—which is not always free of a bureaucratic, even authoritarian drift. Is modernization tantamount to centralization?

“Political modernization” in fact resulted in the exclusion of institutions and groups in favor of communications professionals and a politics focused on image—an example of “post democracy” (Crouch, 2004). The constant

concern for public relations, the professionalization of the government's and the party's political communications, led observers to question media hype and publicity maneuvers and query the substance of government policies. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish reality from its media projection—that is, from spin.¹⁰

The Blair governments generalized analytical models derived from rational choice theory and neoclassical economics,¹¹ introducing market mechanisms, developing incentives and penalties in order to alter the behavior of individuals and transform them into consumers of services maximizing their interests. They relied on local communities, parent associations, or religious groups—and no longer on traditional working-class activist networks. New Labour promoted an original model of political liberalism that has resulted in progressive reforms for integrating minorities and women's rights. At the same time, however, political participation has been discouraged, or rather (to adopt Paul Hirst's phrase), efforts have been directed to "maximizing minimum participation."¹²

In a context marked by a new terrorist threat, political liberalism, social-democracy and neoliberalism form a strange hybrid, object of controversies over the assessment of reforms

(3) A societal project for the middle classes, organized around work, winners, and consumption.

The Labour Party has always been led by an alliance between trade unionists and elites derived from the world of labor on the one hand, and bourgeois elites who have passed through Oxford or Cambridge on the other. We find this characteristic among the New Labour elites, which comprise former workers or trade unionists like John Prescott, MP for Hull in north-east England, or Alan Johnson. However, the new Blairite elites no longer possessed any nostalgia for the labor movement; nor were they obsessed with improving the quality of life of the least well off groups. They represented the middle and upper classes and aspired to educational excellence and individual and material success. Meritocracy was counterposed to the old Conservative elites. New Labour adopted a vision that values winners, entrepreneurs (whatever their color, background, or age), and se-

curity of property and persons; the issues of integration into society and redistribution or discourse on solidarity and public space were set aside. This is also explained by the political strategy of realignment adopted by New Labour to make the party electable. Thatcher had driven the party back into its historical bastions: the north, Scotland, Wales, London, and big towns and cities. To win power and keep it, New Labour needed to win constituencies in the Midlands, the south, and the south-west, controlled by the middle classes: hence the importance of the themes of public services, competition, taxes, and security. New Labour's political strategy of realignment was based on winning over "Middle England"—a rosy representation of the middle and upper classes living in their own houses in the small towns of a verdant England. Tony Blair constantly wooed them with a view to conquering the center ground and driving the Conservatives to the right. He is himself a good representative of the progressive, meritocratic bourgeoisie. His modernizing language, with its moralistic accents, succeeded in convincing the middle classes of the importance of better public services. His wife is a successful lawyer; they have four children (the last of them born in 2000); and he knew how to combine the demands of family life and working life. The Blairs had the way of life of cosmopolitan upper-middle classes, breaking with traditional Labour. They spent their holidays in Tuscany or on a Caribbean island, in the villas of rich and famous friends, rock stars, or businessmen. By contrast, Blair was not always at ease with the trade unions, representatives of the towns of northern England, the Scottish, or Welsh—traditional pillars of the party.

These three dimensions of the New Labour project evolved over the course of ten years. The dynamism created by the phase of winning power was gradually institutionalized, becoming what was sometimes regarded as a quest for change for its own sake. Returning to the Blair era and New Labourism should not lead us to forget the existence of periods whose limits are not strictly defined. In the first phase, attempts at modernization focused primarily on the party's organization and its image, while projects for social reform were barely developed. The first term was marked by a determination to assert the credibility of the new Labour Party as economic manager, public services reformer, and European actor. Never before had

the Labour Party succeeded in staying in government for two terms. Constrained in their early years by the promise to govern within the financial framework determined by the Conservatives, it was only with the second crushing victory of 2001 that the New Labour governments were able to invest massively in public services and accelerate reform of them. The economic growth that allowed Gordon Brown to establish his authority as a triumphant chancellor was based not only on prudent management but also on a favorable global context. The third term was marked by the domestic political consequences of the controversial commitment of British troops to Iraq. The reforms were pursued, but they had lost their novelty and now seemed ideological.

Finally, the government's dynamic was marked by the association and rivalry between two political leaders who dominated their generation in Britain, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Young MPs first elected in 1983, they were then around thirty years old (Brown is three years older) and shared an office in Parliament. They formed an alliance to conquer the party in 1994. Legend has it that, during dinner in a restaurant in Islington (flagship area for the embourgeoisement of north London), Gordon Brown agreed not to run against Tony Blair in the leadership contest.¹³ In exchange, he is said to have promised to hand Gordon Brown complete control over planning of the manifesto and the economy, as well as his succession . . . one day. Appointed chancellor of the exchequer (finance and economics minister), Gordon Brown made the Treasury the control center and cockpit of government action. While Blair's strength was media savvy and his political geniality, Brown excelled at strategic organization. Thus was formed a strange tandem—a duo of hostile brothers. The two men constructed their teams, their base in the party and in the parliamentary majority. Their growing rivalry partially blocked the reformist dynamic and poisoned the Labour Party.¹⁴ One cannot understand the development and tensions within New Labour without taking into account two of its main architects and their intersecting careers (see pages 12–13).

Tony Blair had discovered an international role during the intervention in Kosovo and the negotiations in Ireland. Subsequently, he appealed to people to grasp every opportunity to advance the values of Western democ-

racy and human rights in the world. He engaged in the war against Iraq in good faith, mobilizing all the resources of his political skills and the state apparatus to persuade his fellow citizens, his party, and the press. The intervention was accepted under protest, and Tony Blair's political credit was irreparably damaged when evidence emerged of the manipulation of information (reinforced by the suicide of a scientist), and the conflict between Blair's advisers and the media turned into a confrontation (along with the departure of the chairman of the BBC, the British Broadcasting Corporation). The fact that British troops got bogged down in Iraq and were associated with abuses clouded the picture still further. The left has never forgiven him. Demonstrations by the war's opponents were the largest in the last thirty years. Caricatured as a liar and manipulator, Blair lost the trust of a significant segment of the British population. When the Labour Party risked electoral defeat in 2005, he owed his victory in extremis to the prioritization of Gordon Brown's economic record. Although that played a crucial role in explaining how Tony Blair lost his magic touch with the electorate and became an electoral liability for the party,¹⁵ we have left to one side the issue of Iraq and chosen instead to concentrate on the internal reforms conducted in the country during the decade of Blair's premiership.

The debate on the balance sheet is all the more lively in that the story is not over. Gordon Brown, unstained chancellor of the exchequer and chief architect of the New Labour reforms, is Tony Blair's successor. At the end of June 2007 he inherited a party beset by doubt, weary after ten years in power, and divided over its project.

The government's actions and the reforms are not a matter of indifference across the Channel. Reference to Blair's reforms was a recurrent feature of the French presidential campaign in 2007. In 1997 the Jospin government had taken care to cultivate its difference, and the French Socialist Party had opposed the Third Way invoked by both Blair and Schröder. In 2007, for the left and the extreme left, Blair remained the symbol of the detested "liberal socialism," the friend of the bosses who support globalization. However, others, particularly in foundations with close links to English think tanks, lauded Blairism. The French Socialist Party did not