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# **The 'How' of Election Manifestos in the British Labour Party: A source of ongoing controversy**

## **Introduction**

The organisational history of the British Labour Party is to a significant degree the story of an ongoing struggle over the 'how' of election manifestos, a struggle, somewhat ironically, partly driven by a broad based agreement over the 'why' of manifestos.

British political parties and indeed British politics more widely, are programmatic – that is, based on the idea that election manifestos are a party's plan for government. What is says in the manifesto is what the party will do in government, and anything less, or indeed more, becomes a source of criticism of that government.

Because the manifesto is seen as a programme for government action, this also means that the answer to the 'how' takes on huge importance, because controlling the 'how' means controlling government action.

In the Labour Party the answer to the 'how' question has been the source of a longstanding and often heated dispute. On the one hand there are those who believe that the party's parliamentary leadership must control the 'how'. The parliamentary party is responsible to the electorate and has to answer for their actions at election time. They should therefore have the main say in the policies they will have to defend at a general election.

On the other hand, the parliamentary party is only there because of the work of the grassroots, who selected them as candidates, campaigned for them on the doorstep, and therefore have a right to influence what they do. The parliamentary party is nothing more than the extra-parliamentary party's political arm, and needs to be answerable to the grassroots. Therefore the 'how' should be, at the very least, a close co-operation between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings of the party, ideally with the extra-parliamentary party having the greater weight.

This paper will show the nature and extent of this disagreement, and argue that it has repeatedly damaged the Labour Party's ability to operate effectively. In this struggle the two opposing sides have at various times scored temporary 'victories'. However, whichever argument 'won' at any given time, the long term result was damage to the party's ability to function properly. The paper will also argue that after multiple generations of struggle this issue is essentially still unresolved.

This paper will first outline the changing 'how' of manifestos in the Labour Party, i.e. the process itself. It will then explore, first the broad based agreement over the 'why' of manifestos, and then the deep disagreements over 'how'. The paper will end with discussing the consequences for the Labour Party, in terms of organisational and electoral damage, of its continual failure to reach a long-term solution to the disagreement over the 'how' of manifestos.

## **The changing 'how' of manifestos**

On the surface the 'how' of the Labour Party manifesto has remained very stable. In Clause V of the party's first rules from 1918 it was stated that the party conference would decide on what items should enter the party programme (Labour Party 1918: 83). In addition, the same clause stated that the National Executive and the Parliamentary Labour Party would 'define the principle issues for that Election which in their judgement should be made the Special Party Programme for that particular Election Campaign, which shall be issued as a manifesto by the Executive' based on the 'party programme' (Labour Party 1918: 83). In addition, this so-called Clause V meeting would agree on the party's position on issues relevant to the specific election, but not addressed in the party programme (Labour Party 1929: 261).

Traditionally, the party programme was based around motions passed by conference, originating from affiliated organisation (i.e. trade unions and local constituency parties). These could be on any topic and often numbered in the hundreds (Minkin 1978: 65). Motions were first invited in June to be considered by the Conference Arrangement Committee (CAC) in July where they would be checked for validity (e.g. that they only covered one subject area or the topic had not been discussed in the last three years).

Delegates whose organisations had submitted similar sounding resolutions would meet on the Saturday afternoon prior to the conference to merge their separate resolutions into a single text (Minkin 1978: 67). On the day the conference opened, delegates would receive a booklet containing these composite motions (Minkin 1978: 66-67). The composite motions would then be debated and voted on. Motions from the membership and affiliated organisations thus determined 'a significant portion of the topics for debate' (Russell 2005: 200). The process for submitting motions changed very little from the writing of the party's first constitution until 1998.

One problem with this process was that it seemed to encourage conflict in the party (see e.g. McKenzie 1961; Kelly 2001). The compositing process itself was often the site of struggles between different wings in the party (McKenzie 1978) and had a tendency to distil disagreement in the party into two opposing motions – disagreement which would then be paraded at the conference for the watching media to report on.

In 1998, Tony Blair, flush from his victory in 1997, implemented a new approach to policy making originally entitled Partnership in Power (PiP). This process had already informally run before this time, but it was only now that it became part of the party rules. The 2015 version of Clause V on the Party Programme read:

Party conference shall decide from time to time what specific proposals [...] shall be included in the party programme. This shall be based on the rolling programme of work of the National Policy Forum. (Labour Party 2015a: 3)

PiP replaced the yearly submissions of hundreds of motions and amendments on any aspect of policy with a rolling programme of consultation stretching over several years. At the heart of the process is the National Policy Forum. The NPF is made up of representatives from the constituency parties, trade unions, the parliamentary party, the European Parliamentary Party, the cabinet or shadow cabinet, affiliated socialist societies, a number of councillors, and representatives from the National Executive Committee (NEC). At the start of the process the NPF creates a number of Policy Commissions (PCs), each to oversee an area of policy. Each PC will '...review the existing policy

context, consulting widely both inside and outside the party on the priorities for policy development' (Labour 1997: 14). Over the years each PC reports on the submissions it has received and its discussions to the NPF. Once approved by the NPF these reports are sent on to the conference for further discussion and approval, but not amendment (Labour, 1997).

Towards the end of the process the final documents then form the basis of the actual manifesto. What then goes into the election manifesto is still agreed at a Clause V meeting. This process has remained largely unchanged between 1998 and 2015, although the way the NPF and the PCs consult with stakeholders has evolved significantly over the years – in essence making it increasingly easy to make submissions (see e.g. Gauja 2015). The process leading up to the 2015 manifesto was labelled 'YourBritain' (see Labour 2015b), but was in the main very similar to the original PiP format.

### **Agreement on the 'why' of manifestos.**

Kavanagh (1981: 7) has argued that British political parties are 'programmatic' in that they fight elections on the basis of an election manifesto which is presented as a programme for government. If the party wins the election it is the election manifesto which provides the basic guide and foundation of the subsequent government's actions. This approach to manifestos is arguably driven by the fact that traditionally the UK has had single-party majority governments. This means that the winner can expect to be able to carry out its manifesto pledges with little need for compromise with other political actors.

It is not difficult to see that this is still the case even several decades after Kavanagh's made this argument. The clearest example of this is the Labour Party's use of 'pledge cards' summarising the key elements of the party's election manifesto. Labour's 1997 pledge card contained five very specific pledges that a future Labour Party government would commit to carry out, as well as the suggestion that voters should 'keep this card and see that we keep our promises'. Labour produced similar pledge cards in 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2015, although at each election the pledges became increasingly vague: from e.g. 'we will introduce a fast-track punishment scheme for persistent young offenders by halving the time from arrest to sentencing' in 1997 to 'your community safer' in 2005 and 'strengthen fairness in communities' in 2010 (there were slightly more specific pledges in 2015). It is probably fair to say that the view of the manifesto as a programme for government is very widely accepted in the Labour Party. The evidence for this is in the negative, rather than the positive, i.e. there has been very little debate over the role of the party's manifesto. When there has been controversy it has often been based on Labour's parliamentary leadership (allegedly) not sticking to what was in the manifesto. E.g. in 2003 UNISON, a trade union affiliated to the Labour Party, sponsored a motion at the Labour Party's annual conference in which it was stated that:

The policy on Foundation Hospitals is contrary to the Party's stated manifesto commitment in 1997 to end the internal market and 'put the NHS back together'. It is a policy drawn from nowhere with no prior discussion in the Party structures and no reference in the 2001 manifesto (UNISON 2003: 2)

In other words, the fact that a policy proposal was not mentioned in the previous election manifesto is seen as grounds (with other issues) for rejecting that proposal. Note that the manifesto did not reject Foundation Hospitals – they were merely not mentioned. However, such is the

importance of what is in, and not in, the manifesto that it is a key element in political debate. Another example of the centrality of election manifesto is that one of the most devastating and infamous criticisms of Labour's 1983 election campaign was Gerald Kaufman's quip that the party's manifesto was 'the longest suicide note in history' - a comment so pithy that it has become a staple of British political discourse to this day.<sup>1</sup> Further, when it comes to policy making, the Labour Party rules are heavily focussed on the making of the manifesto, and not much else (Miliband 1958: 171).

The centrality of election manifestos is also evident in the wider context of UK politics. One example is the attack on gay marriage legislation made by the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols. One of the foundations for his attack on gay marriage legislation is that it was not mentioned in any party's 2010 election manifesto.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the focus, even veneration of the importance of the election manifesto, 'manifestoitis', as Kavanagh (1981) calls it, is a key and broadly accepted part of Labour Party life, and indeed of British politics.

### **Disagreeing over 'how'**

However, whilst there is broad agreement on the 'why' there are deep disagreements about the 'how'. Broadly speaking, there are two views on the 'how' of manifestos in the Labour Party, and these are linked to debates on the proper relationship between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary elements of the party. The two views can be summarised as 'grassroots control' vs. 'parliamentary independence'. The debate over who should control the party's policy has gone back to the very early history of the party and flared up at various times including 1907 (parliamentary wing victory); 1959-60 (compromise deal, see e.g. Miliband 1958: 171; Minkin 1978: 6 for discussion of both these battles); and the early 1980s (temporary grassroots wing victory, see e.g. Hobsbawm 2003: 266-8).

Before going on to discuss the two positions it is important to note what is meant by 'grassroots' in the case of the Labour Party. In the Labour Party the extra-parliamentary party is made up of two elements: individual party members organised in Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and affiliated trade unions. The CLPs are what one would traditionally see as 'grassroots'. Because of the financial clout and organisational unity of the trade unions, something lacking amongst the CLPs, their leaders have had a notable level of influence regardless of, and sometimes separate from, the formal policy making processes. Trade unions leaders have often supported the parliamentary leadership's independence against the CLP grassroots (see e.g. Crossman 1963: 41-42) in return for compromise deals.

In short, whilst the trade unions clearly have a stake in the 'grass-roots control' vs. 'parliamentary independence' debate, their organisational power also means that they stand apart from the CLP grassroots in this context.

The 'grass-roots control' view, usually associated with the left wing of the party (Koelble 1987: 253) is that the parliamentary party is there to carry out the wishes of the extra-parliamentary party. This view is also reflected in Duverger's (1954) argument that a mass party such as the Labour Party has a strong desire to control the parliamentary section of the organisation. The grassroots have helped

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21649005-scottish-national-partys-manifesto-does-not-strong-arm-labour-fact-it-condemns-snp>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/dec/25/archbishop-attacks-david-camerons-same-sex-marriage-plans>

create the parliamentary party through their local campaigning and therefore should have the right to dictate, to a significant degree, what the parliamentary party gets up to. For the 'grassroots control' camp the election manifesto becomes a means of 'tying the buggers down' (see Coates 1981: 4). If the election manifesto is a strict programme of action, *and* is written by the members (through their representatives in the National Executive Council and the party conference) it can be a way of controlling the actions of the parliamentary party and by extension any Labour government.

The 'parliamentary independence' view is that the parliamentary party ought to be free from interference from the extra-parliamentary party – that they are responsible, through elections, to the voters broadly and not more narrowly to the party members. This position, most eloquently expressed by McKenzie (1982), is mostly associated with the right wing of the party (Koelble 1987: 253).

Both camps have at various times tied their particular view to normative positions. The 'parliamentary independence' camp has pointed to the ideas of parliamentary government where each MP is dedicated to the interests of his or her constituents (albeit as interpreted by the party's parliamentary leadership) and thus needs to be free of the 'fanatics, cranks and extremists' (as Sidney Webb put it, see Seyd 1987: 202 n1) in the extra-parliamentary party. Conversely, the supporters of the 'grassroots control' camp point to the democratic ideals of active participatory citizenship (see e.g. Miliband 1958: 173).

However, at the heart of the debate are less normative differences, and more a desire to control the writing of the manifesto to ensure that one's own preferred policies take precedence – as noted above the two camps are broadly associated with left and right wing factions in the party. This is exemplified by the fact that when the left has spoken of 'membership control' they have usually argued for such control to be channelled through structures that they felt they could dominate, i.e. party conference and the NEC, rather than say membership plebiscites. The requirement was not for inclusivity, but for control (see Hobsbawm's (2003: 241-2) criticism of Tony Benn's reaction to the temporary triumph of the left in 1981). Likewise, the parliamentary leadership has always been quite happy to accept the decisions of the extra-parliamentary party, as long as they were decisions the leadership agreed with. When that was not the case the parliamentary leadership would either ignore such decisions, or work to overturn them.

### **Of winners and losers**

From 1994 the New Labour leadership made a concerted effort to end the continuous struggle over the 'how' of the Labour Party manifesto with the introduction of what became PiP. PiP and its successors aimed to replace the confrontational debates at the party's annual conference with a rolling programme of consultations on policy documents. In PiP the party's annual conference was relegated to rubberstamping the output of the consultancy process. The consensus seems to be that PiP was a significant victory for the parliamentary independence wing of the party.

Shaw argues that PiP has further increased the leadership's power on the 'how' and the new process has provided 'party gatekeepers with an abundant supply of managerial tools to control the flow of inputs into the policy machinery, smothering and deflecting [...] those items which might pose "problems" or cause "embarrassment" to the leadership' (Shaw 2002: 153). Further, there can be

little doubt that certain elements of the party, mainly on the left, saw PiP as an attack on party membership influence on policy: 'Hard boiled *LLB* [*Labour Left Briefing*] readers do not need reminding that one of the main motivations behind PiP is to rob Party members of any real influence on policy' (Willsman 1997). Russell (2005: 130) does argue that what PiP did was formalise powers that the leadership already possessed, but this still confirms that PiP was a 'parliamentary independence' wing victory. Indeed, Gauja (2015) concludes that YourBritain allowed the leadership to 'by-pass the membership by consulting directly with the community' (p. 101).

In short, the writing of the manifesto in the Labour Party has long been framed as a struggle for control - a struggle where there will be winners and losers. The 'parliamentary independence' wing was in control for most of the party's history, with the 'grassroots control' wing experiencing the occasional and temporary victory, especially in the early 1980s. However, whoever managed to force through their view, this confrontational approach to the 'how' of the Labour Party manifesto has arguably had damaging consequences for the party. The damage has been threefold: 1) to the party's public image; 2) to the party's breadth; and 3) to its activist base.

Public disagreement in a party is often seen as being electorally damaging. The regular outbreaks of policy and constitutional struggles between the 'parliamentary independence' and 'grassroots control' wings of the party resulted in the Labour Party conference being referred to as 'the best seaside bloodsport' (Kavanagh 1996: 26): entertaining for the journalists present, but hardly good for the party's image as competent and worthy of government power.

It is also evident that winning and losing has had the effect of elements of the party giving up and leaving. As Hirschman (1970) argues if members of an organisation lose their voice, i.e. influence, they may well choose to exit the organisation. This happened in 1980-1 where parts of the right wing of the party split away, and from 1994 onwards when the right wing consolidated their control and many on the left quit the party. From one perspective this may seem as a double victory for whichever wing of the party defeated its rival: not only did they win control of the manifesto writing process, but also many of their opponents left leaving the victorious wing's control of the process even stronger.

However, because of the extremely disproportional consequences of the British electoral system at the parliamentary level any UK party with government ambitions needs to cast its net wide if it is to secure enough support to achieve an overall majority of the seats in parliament. Hence, British parties need to be broad umbrella organisations if they are to have any hope of winning. The Labour left-winger Eric Heffer, MP for Liverpool Walton until his death in 1991, wrote: 'The [Labour] Party has long been a type of political coalition, with strong socialist and non-socialist currents, uneasily existing side by side within it' (Heffer 1986: ix). Each side might prefer to exclude the other, but the party's electoral chances are severely curtailed without both sides within the party. It is true that Blair successfully won an unprecedented three terms for Labour whilst excluding the left. However, these victories were won with a, historically speaking, very low share of the vote (see Figure 1), and can therefore to a certain extent be put down to the unpopularity of the Conservative Party as much as the popularity of the Labour Party. Having lost both a significant section of its core left-wing supporters and many of the centrist floating voters the Labour Party achieved a mere 29 percent of the vote in 2010, its second worst post-war electoral result. Its worst post-war result was in 1983

after the defection of a significant element of its right wing, driven out by the internal victories of the left wing. Writing of the Labour Party and its German sister party the SDP, Koelble argues that in

both parties the losers claimed that because of undemocratic procedures established by the winners, they had no choice but to leave the organisation. The outcomes in the factional struggle over party rules produced a defection of activists and leaders to form rival political parties which were largely responsible for the crushing electoral defeats both the Labour Party and the SDP suffered in 1983 (1987: 254)

Finally, it can be argued that the sidelining of the grassroots in policy making has damaged the party's ability to campaign locally. Whiteley and Seyd (2002) show that the most active campaigners amongst the Labour Party's members are also those most likely to want to have an active role in the making of the party's electoral message. They also argue that new members can be recruited through providing the right incentives, such as influence on the party's policies (Seyd and Whiteley 2002). As Kelly writes: 'people will not join a party just to applaud its leaders: there has to be the promise of meaty "influence"' (Kelly 2001: 329). This would suggest that the 'parliamentary independence' advocates' victory after 1994 may have been bought at the expense of membership numbers, activism and thus ultimately votes.

In short, the on-going struggle over the 'how' of manifestos in the Labour Party has damaged the party, and, arguably, is continuing to do so. Temporary victories by one or the other wing have never fundamentally resolved the issue, and have usually led to loss of members and activists from the losing wing, leading ultimately to a loss of voters.

### **Conclusion.**

The longstanding and still unresolved question of the 'how' of manifestos in the Labour Party has undermined the party's ability to achieve its electoral, policy and office holding goals. At various stages one side in the struggle has achieved a victory, but one which had the result of damaging the long term interest of the party as a whole. What is needed for the Labour Party is not for one side to win, and the other to lose, but for there to be a compromise between 'parliamentary independence' and 'grassroots control'.

The current 'answer' - pretence at consultation which allows the leadership to filter out undesirable policies and dampen debate at the annual conference - has certainly dealt with the PR problem of unseemly public clashes at the party conference, at least for awhile. It has however, not dealt with the loss of breadth and loss of activism. It very much appears that the party continues to fail to learn the lessons of the previous rounds of this struggle and will continue to adopt a confrontational approach to its disagreement over the 'how' of manifestos.

The Labour Party is a key example of the importance of the 'how' of election manifestos. The lifelong and continuing struggle to control the 'how' of the manifesto has been a crucial element in the party's organisational development and has caused significant damage to the party throughout its history. The 'how' is clearly not a peripheral or 'merely' academic issue, but something which has very real consequences and deserves far more attention than it has so far been getting, not just in the Labour Party, but elsewhere too.





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Figure 1: Blair's victories in context

