

**Resisting Political Marketing:
Lessons from the making of New Labour**

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Abstract

Examining the challenges encountered in the making of New Labour the paper argues that whilst a market oriented approach can bring significant electoral benefits, there can be an unavoidable price to pay in loss of members and internal dissent for such electoral success. The paper concludes that party leaders will have to decide early on whether they are willing to accept a party product less to their liking by making compromises to dissenting party members, or pay the price in dissent and loss of members caused by forcing through a new party product.

Key words: New Labour, membership dissent, market oriented party

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Introduction

The marketisation of political parties has been a feature of the study of party organisations at least since the 1980s when Panebianco (1988) coined the phrase 'electoral professional' party. The basic argument of this view of political parties is that they have turned to professionals, such as pollsters and PR managers, to help adjust the party's 'product' to make it more appealing to voters. Particularly in the political marketing literature this is seen as a positive development. It is argued that 'market oriented' parties, using professionals to design and sell their product, manage to combine electoral success with meeting voter demands (Lees-Marshment 2001). A prime example of a party which is said to have become market oriented is the British Labour Party in its 'New Labour' guise. However, whilst the Labour Party has achieved significant external benefits in terms of unprecedented electoral success, it has also had to pay a price in internal dissent and loss of members. Labour's experience with market orientation and the problems the party encountered hold important lessons for other parties wanting to adopt a more market oriented approach to running a party organisation.

This paper will analyse Labour's problems, explain some of the reasons behind the costs that Labour has incurred in becoming market oriented, and outline some of the lessons that can be learnt from Labour's experience.

Market oriented parties

Panebianco argued that whilst policy making in the traditional mass party was based on what he call 'the representative bureaucracy', in the electoral-professional party it is based on the use of professionals (Panebianco 1988: 264). By 'representative bureaucracy' Panebianco meant that the party organisation and its members provide a close link between mass party leaders and the *class gardée*, that is the particular class that the party is dedicated to represent. This link worked by party members interacting with non-member supporters, then electing delegates or representatives to participate in party organisational meetings, such as the party conference, where the delegates relayed the wishes of the *class gardée* to the parliamentary party. The parliamentary party then worked to enact legislation to satisfy these wishes. The party members therefore performed a very important linkage function between elected and electors (see Lawson 1988). In the electoral professional party the contact between politicians and citizens is managed by 'professionals (the so-called experts, technicians with special knowledge)' (Panebianco 1988: 264). Panebianco never specifies exactly what kind of experts he is referring to, but it is a fair assumption that what he meant was professional campaign organisers, pollsters, and what has become known as spin-doctors. In other words, voters no longer communicate their needs and wishes to politicians through grassroots party members, but through opinion polls and focus groups. This change is partly a response to an increasingly volatile electoral market where voters are less likely to vote according to class loyalties and family ties to parties, but rather according to flexible and changing calculations about which party is most likely to benefit voters personally. As a result parties have to understand the

immediate demands and wishes of voters if they are to be successful in the electoral arena. As Farrell and Webb put it: 'The increasing tendency is less one of selling themselves to voters, but rather one of designing an appropriate product to match voter needs' (Farrell and Webb 2000: 102). This is what Lees-Marshment has called a market oriented approach (Lees-Marshment 2001). According to Lees-Marshment a market oriented party 'designs its behaviour to provide voter satisfaction. It uses market intelligence to identify voter demands, then designs its product to suit them.' (Lees-Marshment 2001: 30).

New Labour and market orientation

According to Lees-Marshment the British Labour Party in its 'New Labour' incarnation is 'the most recent and easily identifiable case of political marketing. During 1992-97 the Labour Party became a classic Market-Oriented Party' (Lees-Marshment 2001: 181). The New Labour 'brand' was the culmination of a long process of reforms of the party's policies and organisation started in the mid to late 1980s by then party leader Neil Kinnock (see Russell 2005 for further details of the changes that happened in Labour). The term 'New Labour' was the brain child of Tony Blair (Labour leader 1994-2007) and his close advisers. New Labour involved significant changes to; 1) the party's organisation, especially in terms of policy making; 2) its symbols, particularly Clause IV of the party's constitution which set out the party's fundamental aims and principles, and; 3) its policies, embracing the use of private capital in provided public services and combined with a deep reluctance to use increases in income tax to fund public service investments.

New Labour therefore involved massive changes to almost every aspect of the party's life, both internally and externally. These changes resulted in unprecedented electoral success for the party between 1997 and 2005 securing it three consecutive election victories, something the party had never achieved before. However, Lees-Marshment also criticises the Labour Party:

But the New Labour design is a problem. During the market-oriented process, Labour alienated traditional supporters and critiques contend it has lost all its ideology and beliefs and stands for nothing (Lees-Marshment 2001: 181)

Lees-Marshment argues that to be successful as a market oriented party it has to go through a number of stages (see Figure 1). Most of these stages New Labour managed very well, as exemplified by a very skillful use of market intelligence in the form of polling data, opinion surveys and focus groups. However, where the party fell down was in convincing the party at large to embrace the New Labour product: 'the extent to which the new product design was accepted by the party is questionable. Implementation was achieved superficially, but perhaps only because of the desire for electoral success and strict leadership control' (Lees-Marshment 2001: 193). Indeed, getting the party to accept the new product was less of a concern than electoral success. Rather, forced acquiescence was the order of the day: 'Blair did not give much attention to adjusting the product to suit internal support. [...] All troubles were suppressed in the desire to win' (Lees-Marshment 2001: 181).

The result was that the party as a whole never really accepted the New Labour brand. Many members and party notables would proudly declare

themselves to be 'Old Labour'. According to Lees-Marshment, this could have been avoided had the leadership taken more care with 'internal product adjustment' - that is adjust the product to make it more palatable to the party. The reason why this was not done, according to Lees-Marshment, was largely down to Blair's leadership style:

[Blair] decided what should be done and argued the case for it. He could have asked the party in advance what they thought about whether the constitution needed to be changed, rather than argue the case after it had been decided. He might have gained more support that way. (Lees-Marshment 2001: 189-190)

However, this paper will argue that whilst Lees-Marshment may be correct in her criticism of the shortcomings of New Labour's version of market orientation there are good reasons for why the New Labour leadership had problems particularly when it came to 'internal product adjustment'. As we shall see there are good reasons to believe that the Labour leadership may have gone with the *fait accompli* approach because they knew that consultation would not have worked considering both how far they wanted to change the Labour product and the nature of the party. The dissent that the new product generated may therefore have been seen by the leadership as a price worth paying.

Designing the Product

However, before looking at the Labour Party itself we will first examine one of the central features of what a market oriented party is supposed to do: design a product to meet voter demands. The idea of a market orientation is that a party will take great care to research, design and sell its product.

According to Lees-Marshment (2001: 27) the product of a party is its behaviour at all levels and includes leadership, Members of Parliament, membership, staff, symbols, constitution, activities and policies (see Figure 2). However, these areas of behaviour are not identical and require very different approaches when trying to 'design' them. When it comes to the first four areas we are not talking about something which can be designed on a drawing board the way a symbol can. Rather, we are talking about the behaviour of individuals, which is not really something one can 'design', but rather something that has to be guided and controlled. It is true that it is entirely possible to gather information about what kind of individual behaviour is more or less attractive to voters. Leaders can then attempt to guide and control the behaviour of individuals in the party accordingly. Obviously, this very much requires the co-operation of the individuals concerned. The extent to which party members are willing to cooperate will depend on what party members feel about taking orders from their leaders.

Obviously leaders are there to lead, and one might expect party members to be willing to follow their leaders. However, there are different ways of viewing leadership. The problem is that as Michels (1949) showed any organisation beyond a certain size needs fulltime leaders. Even in a party with aspiration for internal democracy it is quite simply impossible for everybody to be involved in the day to day running of the party once it is beyond a certain size (about 1000 members according to Michels). So, it is possible to view leaders simply as a necessary evil to be reined back as much as possible. As Duverger points out, in some parties 'there is a certain more or less open mistrust of the parliamentary group, and a more or less definite

desire to subject it to the authority of an independent controlling committee' (Duverger 1964: xxxv). If that is how leaders are viewed their ability to control party members according to some predetermined design may be problematic. To some extent the power of leaders to control the behaviour of the rest of the party is determined by the party rules, which ought to set out the power and responsibilities of the different element of the party. However, the party rules are written and amended by individuals within the party, so the balance of power between the leadership and the rest of the party will to a large extent be a reflection of the party's collective attitude to leadership. Michels (1949: 61) argued that party members are generally grateful that there are people in the party who are willing to taken on the 'burden' of leadership and are quite happy for the leadership to just get on with leading the party. However, as we shall see this is not universally true.

When it comes to the latter four areas of a party's behaviour it is much more appropriate to talk about designing them. It is indeed possible to design a symbol or create party laws, activities and policies according to a design. Whilst this may be much easier to achieve than controlling the behaviour of individuals, it is still, as Lees-Marshment points out, necessary for the party leaders to convince the rest of the party that these changes are necessary. The extent to which it is possible to convince individuals within the party of the need for such changes will crucially depend on what party members feel about how a party's behaviour should be designed. Should it be designed according to the party's *a priori* principles, or according to the ever changing demands of the voters? In other words should the party design its product

according to the demands of the market or according to the fundamental values of the party?

So, the extent to which party leaders can successfully move their party in a market oriented direction depends on the attitude of the party as a whole, both to the issue of leadership and to what should be the source of a party's product.

The following will use data from questionnaire surveys carried out of Labour Party members to explain the problems the New Labour leadership have had in getting the party to support a new product based on market intelligence.

New Labour's challenges

As Kirchheimer (1966) points out, one of the things that often happens when a party tries to expand beyond its traditional audience or market is that 'ideological baggage' gets jettisoned. This can be necessary when trying to design a new product to suit voter demands. So, if the product is seen as being unattractive, it will obviously have to be changed. As we can see from Table 1 dumping party principles for electoral purposes is *not* a popular proposal in the Labour Party. A massive 61.8 percent of those asked in 1999 believed that the party should stick to its principles even if it meant losing an election. This is almost identical to what it was in 1989-90, that is in what was then still a pre-'New' Labour Party. It therefore seems that Labour members have a long standing opposition to ditching party principles in the name of electoral expediency. Clearly, this will limit the manoeuvrability of party leaders in adopting a new product.

Having said that, one of the things that New Labour leaders were careful to emphasise was that New Labour was not about ditching Labour's traditional values, but about fighting for them with new tools. As Blair said to the Labour conference in 2003: 'From now on, we said: we stand for certain values. The values are unchangeable. But the policies are open to change. We made the ends sacrosanct. We put the means up for discussion so that each time could find the right expression for values that are for all time'.¹ Within that discourse it might still be possible to satisfy those wanting to put principles above votes, whilst still changing the product.

However, in addition to using new tools for a new era, a major element of New Labour's platform has been based on capturing the middle ground of politics. For example, in the lead up to the 2005 general election, Tony Blair is quoted as having said: 'It is time for a second phase of New Labour, defined less by reference to the old Labour Party, than by an agenda for the country, radical but firmly in the centre ground'.² In his speech to the 2003 Labour Party conference Blair said 'By occupying the centre ground, by modernising, by reaching out beyond our activists, we helped turn the Tories into a replica of what we used to be'.³ These are just two example of what has been a consistent and dominant theme in New Labour. However, as can be seen from Table 2 there has been considerable opposition to the drive to move the Labour Party towards the centre. It is true that in 1999 44.6 percent of Labour members surveyed agreed or agreed strongly with the view that the Labour Party should move to the middle ground of politics. Nevertheless, a third of

¹ <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour2003/story/0,,1052752,00.html> accessed 17 August 2007

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/basics/4348533.stm accessed 17 August 2007.

³ <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour2003/story/0,,1052752,00.html> accessed 17 August 2007

the party indicates an opposition to the move to the centre ground, with a further 21 percent being undecided. This explains both why the leadership were successful in moving the party to the centre, but also why they faced considerable opposition in doing so. The leadership could more often than not win a party conference vote on centre seeking policy proposals, but with a third of members opposed to some degree, it was never going to be done quietly. It is also worth noting that even in 1989-90, four years before Blair came to power there was considerable opposition to a centre ground approach with 32.8 percent against. In other words, the opposition to moving to the centre ground is not something sparked by the creation of New Labour, and can therefore not be blamed on insufficient internal adjustment. Clearly, even in Old Labour there was considerable opposition to a centre ground approach.⁴

However, the opinions and possible opposition of members to certain policy initiatives is one thing. Quite another is if they are willing to express their disagreement and dissatisfaction when being given instructions from their leaders about how to behave, what policies to promote and what symbols to fight for. As has been pointed out elsewhere: 'what is needed for membership dissent to occur is not just disagreement but also the willingness to dissent' (Pettitt 2006: 297). In other words, even if members disagree with their leaders they may still follow them. The extent to which party members are willing to follow their leaders despite disagreeing with them depends, as argued above, on the party's view of leadership. As can be seen from Table 3 Labour has a somewhat sceptical view of leadership. A plurality of 42.1

⁴ Having said that it is also clear that support for a centre ground approach has declined markedly from 55.5 percent in 1992 to 44.6 percent in 1999. Clearly, the reality in 1999 of moving to the centre ground has been considerably less appealing than the theory in 1992.

percent of members disagreed with the statement that the role of party members is to follow the leadership's decisions, thus outnumbering those who agreed with it by 2.5 percentage points. There is therefore a significant group in the party who feel that they have a right to resist the leadership's decisions. Considering this evidence, Blair was probably speaking from experience when in 2003 he said: 'I know I can't say "I am the leader, follow me". Not that that was your strong point anyway.'⁵

We can therefore see that the New Labour leadership has been faced with a two-fold problem when trying to adapt Labour's products to the demands of the market. Firstly, the members have for a long time been uncomfortable with the party moving to the centre of politics. Secondly, there is a notable willingness in the party to resist leadership decisions. It therefore seems that the New Labour leadership has had to deal with a significant section of the membership which was not only worried about the New Labour project, but also happy to express that worry. Also looking back on Labour history it has not just been the 'New' Labour leadership which has come under attack from the members. Indeed, as has been pointed out elsewhere:

...throughout much of the Labour Party's history its annual conference was seen by a significant number of conference delegates as an opportunity to explain to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in great detail and at great length what it was doing wrong (Pettitt 2006: 289).

Complaints about the leadership's line is therefore not a New Labour problem or something created by the manner in which the New Labour product was implemented but a long standing Labour tradition. Indeed, it was only with New Labour's reforms of the policy making process and the New

⁵ <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/labour2003/story/0,,1052752,00.html> accessed 17 August 2007

Labour leadership's so called 'control freakery' that some of this dissent was brought under control. Opposition to the New Labour product was and is therefore not necessarily something which could have been dealt with through wider consultation. Indeed, wider consultation may have increased dissent by giving opponents of the New Labour project advance warning of what was coming and therefore more time to organise.

New Labour's problems in perspective

However, one might well ask to what extent the problems the New Labour leadership faced with a rebellious membership is somehow unique. Would other party leaders have to face the same kind of resistance, or did the New Labour leaders just not do a very good job at dealing with a rebelliousness found in all parties? This is not an easy question to answer as there is very little comparative data. However, there is still some data we can examine.

As we can see from Table 4, in 1992 the members of the British Conservative Party were even more reluctant than the Labour Party members to sacrifice political principles for electoral expediency. This significant difference may well be down to the fact that by this time the Labour Party had been in opposition for more than a decade. It would therefore seem that Labour would have been an easier party to make market oriented than the Conservatives at that time. However, as we can see from Table 5, the Conservative party was at that time far more willing than the Labour Party to make a move to the centre. The opposition to centre ground policies in Labour is therefore marked compared to the Conservative Party. The difference

between the two sets of answers can perhaps be explained by the fact that the centre ground in 1992 was identified more with the Conservative Party than the Labour Party. The members of both parties were reluctant to give up ideological values for electoral expediency, but Conservative Party members were less reluctant to move to the centre than Labour Party members, because the centre was associated with conservative values. Hence overall, the Labour Party would have been more difficult to move to the centre through a market oriented approach to the party's product.

Looking beyond the UK the problems of the New Labour leaders are illustrated further. Table 6 shows the level of rebelliousness in Labour compared to the rebelliousness in Danish parties. The first thing to note is that in Labour's Danish sister party, the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterne, SD) members are considerably more loyal towards the leadership than in Labour. As we can see, an overall, if slim majority of SD member agree that their role is to support decisions made by the leadership. Further, apart from the Social Liberals, centre parties of both the left and the right have a reasonably loyal membership. It therefore appears that, at least in this limited sample, Labour has an unusually high level of rebelliousness and resistance to centrist policies compared to other parties of the political centre.

Discussion

This was then the problem Blair faced when he embarked on his project to create his market oriented 'New Labour': a membership with a significant element of rebelliousness, a strong affinity with traditional Labour principles and an unwillingness to move to the political centre. Instead of consultation

and adjustment a major part of the solution to this problem was to change the party's internal decision making processes radically in ways which according to Shaw meant that 'many of the channels for voicing criticism and challenging the leadership [were] either closed down or rendered ineffective' (2002: 148). Shaw also argued that 'the new policy making system has undoubtedly helped prevent the highly publicised conflicts which marred relations between the government and the party in the 1970s' (p 157) again suggesting that criticism of the leadership is not a New Labour problem. However, the price for quelling membership dissent has been not only a sharp drop in membership, no doubt partly because members have felt themselves to be ignored, but also, as Lees-Marshment points out above an only partly successful move towards market orientation.

However, as we have seen above the presence of a significant element of rebelliousness made consultation difficult. There is no doubt that there was much to criticise about Blair's leadership style, but considering the major changes necessary in order to make the party market-oriented and the nature of the Labour Party it is entirely likely that no method would have yielded a satisfactory result.

One of the main lesson to be learnt from the process of moving the Labour Party in a market oriented direction is that regardless of how the product is designed and adjusted in the light of internal reaction there will sometimes be, even considerable, dissent. It is possible that dissent can be reduced through consultation, but depending on the attitude of members the level of compromise necessary to avoid dissent could make the process of marketisation meaningless. If the product is changed too much in the light of

internal reaction it may no longer be attractive to voters and there is little point in going through the process of designing an appealing product. In other words the lesson from Labour's move towards a more market oriented position is that in some parties the process can only be partially successful. Not because the process has been carried out badly, but because the raw material - the party organisation - is simply not willing to become market oriented. It may still be possible to use a market oriented approach to achieve remarkable electoral success, as has been the case for the Labour Party between 1997 and 2005. However, depending on the nature of a party there can be an unavoidable price for such success, in the case of the Labour Party the loss of more than two thirds of its members since the mid-1990s and considerable internal dissent. The Labour leadership had the choice between forcing a new product on a reluctant membership and pay a price in dissent and loss of members, or not go as far as they wanted in creating the product they thought would ensure the success of the New Labour project. The lack of consultation with the party members may therefore be less to do with a failure to adjust the product based on internal reaction, and more to do with a conscious decision to pay the price of pushing through the New Labour product based on the knowledge that no amount of consultation would succeed in bring the party to where the leadership wanted it to be. Labour is therefore an example of what a market oriented approach can do for a party in terms of electoral success, but also a warning of what the price can be. Party leaders wanting to move in a market oriented direction therefore have to make a conscious decision on what price they are willing to pay, either in terms of

accepting a product less to their liking, or in the organisational costs of pushing through a product the party is reluctant to accept.

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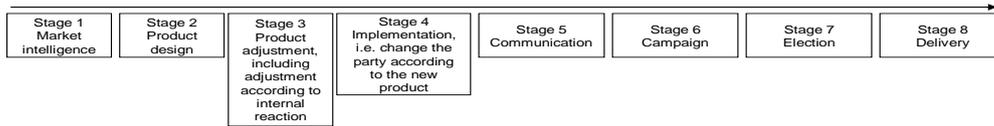
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Tables and Figures

Figure 1



Lees Marshment 2001: 31

Figure 2: The product

The product is a party's behaviour at all levels and includes:

- The leadership
- Members of Parliament
- Membership
- Staff
- Symbols
- Constitution
- Activities
- Policies

Lees-Marshment 2001: 27

Table 1: The Labour Party should always stand by its principles even if this should lose an election

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total n |
|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1989-90 | 60.8% | 11.9% | 27.3% | 4936 |
| 1999 | 61.8% | 16.7% | 21.5% | 5517 |

Data source: Seyd and Whiteley (1999) and Seyd et al (1992).

Table 2: Labour should adjust policies to capture the middle ground of politics

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total n |
|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1989-90 | 57.3% | 9.9% | 32.8% | 4911 |
| 1999 | 45.0% | 21.0% | 34.0% | 5530 |

Data source: Seyd and Whiteley (1999) and Seyd et al (1992).

Table 3: The role of party members is to support decisions made by the leadership

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total <i>n</i> |
|--------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Labour 1999 | 39.6% | 18.2% | 42.1% | 5568 |

Data source: Seyd and Whiteley (2002)

Table 4: Tory and Labour: should always stand by its principles even if this should lose an election

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total <i>n</i> |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Conservatives 1992 | 81.3% | 8.2% | 10.5% | 2404 |
| Labour 1989-90 | 60.8% | 11.9% | 27.3% | 4936 |

Data source: Seyd et al (1992) and Whiteley et al (1992).

Table 5: Tory and Labour: should adjust policies to capture the middle ground of politics

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total <i>n</i> |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------------|----------------|
| Conservatives 1992 | 69.7% | 13.3% | 17.0% | 2305 |
| Labour 1989-90 | 57.3% | 9.9% | 32.8% | 4911 |

Data source: Seyd et al (1992) and Whiteley et al (1992).

Table 6: The role of party members is to support decisions made by the leadership Labour and Danish parties.

| | Agree/Strongly Agree | Neither | Disagree/Strongly Disagree | Total <i>n</i> |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---------|----------------------------|----------------|
| British Labour | 39.6% | 18.2% | 42.1% | 5568 |
| Danish parties | | | | |
| <i>Left wing</i> | | | | |
| Red Green Alliance | 16.3% | 10.3% | 73.4% | 612 |
| Socialist People's Party | 20.4% | 10.6% | 69% | 519 |
| Social Democrats | 50.7% | 14.8% | 34.5% | 588 |
| Social Liberals | 26.3% | 14.7% | 59.0% | 571 |
| <i>Centre</i> | | | | |
| Centre Democrats | 51.5% | 18.8% | 29.7% | 464 |
| Christian Democrats | 48.6% | 22.1% | 29.3% | 447 |
| Liberals | 54.6% | 17.6% | 27.8% | 529 |
| Conservatives | 59.1% | 16.6% | 24.3% | 559 |
| Danish People's Party | 76.9% | 11.5% | 11.7% | 489 |
| <i>Right wing</i> | | | | |

Data source: Bille et al (2000) and Seyd and Whiteley (2002). Data is for 1999 for Labour and 2001 for Danish parties.