

12. Conclusion

Nick Anstead and Will Straw

What does the Labour Party believe its role should be in the 21st century? Is it satisfied that a political party can be merely a means to electoral victory and therefore to subsequent achievements such as the foundation of the NHS or the creation of the minimum wage? Or should it aim to be more than that?

For progressives, successful political parties must be both a means *and* an end, playing a critical role in creating a vibrant space for civic participation and deliberation. This is a fundamental part of the constitutional left's definition of the good society, because apathy and disengagement are the enemy of progress and the nursemaids of reaction – the antithesis of what we seek to achieve. We believe that the Labour Party must, once again, become the spiritual home of the broad left and all those committed to a progressive – rather than a conservative – future.

As the authors in this book demonstrate, Barack Obama's victory suggests that increased participation and a situation where citizens feel that politics matters and take an active part in fighting for what they believe is compatible with, and increasingly important to, modern politics. Many facets of the Obama campaign are, of course, uniquely American, and made possible by the political culture and institutions in the United States. It is very unlikely that British parties, especially Labour twelve years into government, will be able to replicate the scale or intensity of enthusiasm that Obama generated

The Change We Need

(itself partly a product of eight years of reactionary, unilateral government).

But the American election does hold vital lessons that political parties must learn in order to equip themselves to campaign effectively and facilitate a healthy and modern democracy. Failure to grasp the implications of Obama's victory could result in electoral meltdown as other parties steal a march. Nonetheless, these lessons are ripe for misinterpretation. Some may think that the Party's task is to adopt the best ideas, practices and technologies used by Barack Obama and bolt them on to how we currently carry out party politics and campaigning. However, as Matthew McGregor argues in chapter 9, a 'build it and they will come' mentality to new campaign techniques is deeply flawed.

Instead, the facilitation of a new movement politics by the Labour Party should go deeper: it should change more fundamentally not just how the Party competes for election but also how it is organised and how it mobilises support. Thus, while Obama's election provides opportunities for Labour, it also poses a huge challenge to which the Party must respond. It depends on fully exorcising the ghost of the self-destructive indiscipline of the 1980s, the memory of which has driven a command and control approach to all aspects of party campaigns and organisation. Labour must also unlearn several of the techniques which were successful in the early years of 24/7 media in the 1990s but which are now inappropriate and counter-productive, as we enter a new age of fragmented and personalised news consumption.

Some will contend that letting go of the top down model will end in disaster, with a return to the internecine warfare of the past. But Obama showed that a successful campaign requires a mixture of a centrally managed core message alongside decentralised tools of self-organisation and a culture where it is OK to openly challenge policy and strategy. If Labour proves unwilling

Conclusion

or unable to make the leap required, it risks ceding its role as probably the most potent weapon progressives have to achieve political change. If it cannot open up, it will become disconnected from new political movements and organisations. To understand how Labour can meet these challenges, we must first understand how it got to where it is today.

The three ages of the post-war Labour Party

The political historian Kevin Jeffreys has written that, "The Attlee era was the closest Labour ever came to becoming a mass movement, but even at this pinnacle it represented only a small fraction of the Party's electorate."¹ While this may have been the case, it is also important to note that the Labour Party of the 1950s had a strong relationship with the lifestyles, associations and rhythms of British life. This cannot not be said of any modern political party in the UK. With the exception of a brief uptick in the early Blair era, Labour Party membership has been in decline for many years. While some constituency associations remain a vibrant focal point of community action, there are many others – particularly where there is no MP or council leader to rally behind – that lack either the personnel or the financial resources to function effectively. Meanwhile, the national organisation has become a professionalised election-winning machine, favouring command and control over participatory politics.

Some choose to blame the New Labour project for the declining energy among the base but while this argument offers a comfotingly simple explanation, and correspondingly simple answer, to the Party's current predicament, it is dangerously reductionist and ahistorical. Firstly, declining membership is a 50 year-old phenomenon. In 1952, Labour had more than one million members above and beyond union affiliates.² Political parties during this period were successful because their organisational structures

The Change We Need

reflected the lives of the membership and offered an expression of social solidarity. Branches and constituency parties were firmly grounded in localities, and would thus encompass family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. Labour and Working Men's Clubs were linked to a local party and acted as important social hubs. In the early 1950s, the glue that held the Party together was not a rigid ideology or worldview, but instead a set of shared values and aspirations held by a broad community of supporters.

By the 1980s, the Party had a membership of fewer than 300,000 people. This decline was driven by social change as class de-alignment occurred. This reflected a more fragmented society where social solidarity was breaking down. As a result, identity became more complex and social networks more geographically disparate. This degraded the social glue that had held the Party together. Furthermore, in the age of home entertainment, the social benefits that once tempted people to join Labour were simply no longer an enticement.

The decline in membership fundamentally altered the character of the Party and was one of the root causes of the near-civil war which Labour underwent in the early 80s. The members that remained were more likely to view the world through an ideological prism, and adopt positions at odds with the Party's leadership and, more seriously, with the public. This situation was exacerbated by the creation of the Social Democratic Party in 1981. Furthermore, declining membership left Labour prone to entryism, with organisations from the hard left – which Labour had kept at arms length since its foundation – able to get their members to join failing constituency parties, and to usurp their role within Labour's decision-making apparatus. Power within Labour became uneasily suspended between the Parliamentary Labour Party and the shadow cabinet on the one hand, and the National Executive Committee, constituency parties, and conference on the other – a two-headed hydra that pulled the Labour movement in different directions. The

Conclusion

fissure in leadership led to the drafting of the disastrous 1983 manifesto and Labour's subsequent electoral meltdown.

Since political parties' principal motivation is to win power and change society according to their view of the common good, this situation was unsustainable. Gradually, Labour 'modernisers' – first Neil Kinnock, then John Smith and subsequently Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – remodelled the Party. They did this by concentrating power in the hands of the parliamentary leadership, making the whole operation far more professional and well managed, and rebranding the Party as 'New Labour.'

This approach to politics had a considerable upside: three election victories, two of them landslides, and a period of unprecedented success. The Conservative Party, the most potent election winning force in Western Europe, was cowed to an unprecedented degree. Indeed, for a short period during the early years of Tony Blair's leadership, Labour's renewed electability led to an increase in Party membership. But there were ultimately big downsides. It created a culture of centralised politics at the heart of Labour. Scarred by the experiences of the 1980s the leadership became deeply fearful of ceding power to the grassroots, who they felt could be recaptured by the hard left. In turn, members felt disempowered and isolated from a Party elite that seemed increasingly distant. These developments created a paradox: while the organisational ideology of New Labour can be seen as a rational response to membership decline, it also became a cause of it. By 2007, the Party was down to 182,000 members.

Rethinking the logic of collective action

Participation is a good thing. But in order to generate engagement in the 21st century – and reap all the political and civic rewards that come with it – Labour must seriously consider the forms of its organisation. The Obama campaign demonstrates that generating more participation is

The Change We Need

possible today if parties adapt to the new social and technological reality and are driven by a singular theme. Although Bush's failures and Obama's positive message was critical, participation on this scale is not a uniquely American phenomenon. In the United Kingdom, campaigns such as Make Poverty History have managed to engage millions of people. These successes are not coincidental. Modern American electoral campaigns share many characteristics with civil society and pressure groups, and are what political scientist Andrew Chadwick terms hybrid organisations – part party, part movement.³ As yet, British parties have failed to achieve such a transformation partly because they still function within institutional arrangements created in the 20th century.

The institutions that are necessary for new forms of campaign organisation have a number of distinct characteristics:

- They lack rigid institutions or overly hierarchical structures;
- They have a high level of internal pluralism;
- They have the lowest barriers to entry possible;
- They allow for multifaceted forms of participation among supporters;
- They have the ability to act as a platform on which motivated individuals and groups can self-organise;
- They are capable of interacting with other groups in the broader political eco-system.

These characteristics, alongside a singular and focused message, are shared by many successful modern political organisations. The great achievement of the Obama campaign was to take this model of activism and employ it to

Conclusion

achieve electoral success, first in defeating the 'inevitable' candidacy of Hillary Clinton and then winning a popular majority in the presidential elections, the first time a Democratic candidate had achieved this feat in over 30 years.

How was this achieved? In a similar way to New Labour in the 1990s, the Obama campaign centralised its message. A narrative of 'hope' and 'change' – adjectives that the candidate himself embodied – was chosen at an early stage, and maintained with discipline and fervour, as David Lammy describes. Little expense was spared in achieving effective branding and cultivating an image of professionalism. The Obama team also excelled in data management, ruthlessly harvesting readily available information about their supporters as the insights offered by Yair Ghitza and Todd Rogers show. This data was used to construct a personal relationship with each individual, based on their interests, networks and willingness to work for the campaign. Additionally, Karin Christiansen and Marcus Roberts prove that training in effective campaigning techniques, such as canvassing and fundraising, was a hugely effective political weapon. This approach ensured that supporters were effectively managed and galvanised, and that the campaign was able to wring them for every last donation and hour of volunteering.

In contrast to Labour's recent history, however, the Obama team decentralised many other aspects of the campaign, and gave citizens a huge amount of freedom to self-organise. Here, the internet proved to be a vital tool. In particular, Barack Obama's web site contained a social networking element, my.barackobama.com, or MyBO as it became known. This allowed users to register with the campaign, and then create policy or interest groups with like-minded supporters (such as Veterans for Obama), organise their own fundraising drives or canvassing events, and advocate their beliefs through blogs or online petitions. This approach was extremely successful. For

The Change We Need

example, MyBO was used to organise 200,000 campaign events in communities across the country. These meetings did not come about because they were organised centrally or even planned by a local committee, but instead because self motivated citizens used tools provided by the campaign to organise themselves.

This approach to politics did not just exist in the online space. It was practiced at the community level too. As one volunteer in Ohio explained:

"It's about empowering... we turn them around and say, 'Well hey, here's how to be a community organiser. Let me help you be a community organiser.' And then they go out and they get people to be their coordinators. And then we tell those new coordinators, 'Build yourself a team and be organisers too.' There's no end to it."⁴

Unlikely as it might seem, there are strong similarities between the Obama campaign and the parties of the 1950s. Both were constructed around real world social networks and supporter interaction. The great achievement of the Obama campaign was to employ technology to galvanise the more complex, geographically dispersed social networks that western citizens inhabit in the early 21st century. For example, in a manner similar to social networking sites such as Facebook, users of MyBO could upload their personal email address books, allowing them to contact all their family and friends and ask if they too wanted to sign up to support Obama. The internet also helped to connect supporters in strongly Republican areas of the country, where Democrats had previously been too isolated to organise.

This type of campaigning holds huge potential for Labour but may appear to hold significant risks too. Many supporters would argue that decentralisation will allow interest groups to capture campaign and policy making functions, in the way that Militant did in the

Conclusion

1980s. But it is easy to overstate this danger since entryism is only possible in closed institutions that lack firm roots in the wider community. The best long term defence we have against such attacks is not to raise barriers to participation, but to lower them.

Nor should we make the mistake of thinking that dissent is always a bad thing, an institutional mindset of which, at times, Labour has been guilty. The Obama campaign demonstrated that debate on policy can occur within a campaign in a respectful and successful manner. Indeed, MyBO could be used to agitate against the candidate's positions. Most famously, this occurred when more than 23,000 supporters joined a group to protest at Obama's support for legislation that granted legal immunity to telecommunications companies that had co-operated with the Bush administration's program of wiretapping without warrants. But rather than rebuking this group of dissenters, Obama replied directly to the group online and set out his own justification. Although agreement was not reached, campaigners felt that their concerns had been heard. Furthermore, this 'revolt' included few displays of aggression or disrespect, because activists were treated like adults and, in turn, offered the same courtesy to the campaign. A few individuals who did use the web site to make inflammatory or derogatory comments were quickly rebuked – not by the upper echelons of the campaign or some anonymous moderator, but by other activists, proving that successful participatory organisations do not need to a top-down structure to manage and respond to negative content.

Labour must escape the historical frame in which debates about structure have recently occurred. The Party must no longer view organisational decisions as a choice between the fragmented chaos of the 1980s and a 1990s-style concentration of power. Instead it must look for a new configuration that recognises today's social

The Change We Need

and technological circumstances and combines the mix of the message discipline of the 1990s with the open discourse that citizens have now come to expect.

Labour has a dedicated and professional staff who work imaginatively on uncompetitive wages to make the Party an effective campaigning force. Across the country, there are thousands of volunteers who work tirelessly with little or no reward to get Labour elected and to encourage and challenge its representatives in office. But the Party has not done these supporters and employees justice and evolved to cope with new social patterns and norms. While constitutional changes have updated the Party's core ideology and voting structures, they have not addressed the evolving desire in society to combine the individual and the collective; to find solidarity and kinship at the local level, on a timetable that suits the individual. This is the great challenge the Party faces and the real lesson of the American election.

Conclusion

We would do well to remember that no political organisation has a divine right to exist. Indeed, rather like a species of animal unable to cope with a changing environment, over the centuries parties have come and gone as the political climate has changed. While social and technological revolutions offer exciting opportunities for success, they can also be very dangerous.

All British parties are still creatures of the mass media age, when news production and dissemination was concentrated in the hands of national and local newspapers and a handful of radio and TV stations. However, as this period recedes, and we move towards an era of personalised media consumption, typified by a greater number of channels, entertainment on demand, online shopping, internet dating, social networking, and home working, parties will desperately need activists to spread their

Conclusion

message and act as advocates of their policies within communities. Yet, paradoxically, activists need political parties less than they once did. In the networked society, citizens do not require the institutional scaffolding offered by parties to engage in political activity. Anyone can set up a simple campaigning group on an issue with a few clicks of a mouse. If people share their concerns, that group may have thousands of members in just a few hours at virtually no cost.

In such an environment, the onus is on parties to make themselves attractive vehicles for political activism and to greatly broaden their appeal. To these ends, we advocate the following five principles:

1. Remove all barriers to participation

Obama's 13 million-strong email list yielded four million individual donations. By contrast, Labour Party membership fees create a barrier to entry and make it harder to regularly ask supporters for donations. The Party currently takes in £4 million a year from its membership fees and an additional £2.3 million in 'top up' donations from around 70,000 members. This is an average of roughly £20 per subscription-only member and £50 from the more generous or wealthy. By contrast, Obama raised an average of roughly \$170 (£120) from each of his donors. The time has clearly come for a new approach to this critical component of being a Labour supporter.

Scrapping party subscriptions, and instead moving towards regular fundraising drives of members and the wider progressive community, would offer supporters the chance to contribute to specific issues or electoral-based campaigns. Requests for cash could be linked to particular events like the 60th anniversary of the NHS or a local election campaign. To avoid a funding cliff edge, this new model could be phased in gradually by giving new members the right to set their own subscription level (including

The Change We Need

paying nothing). Existing members could be encouraged to change their subscription fee with an assumption, but no obligation, that it would increase.

2. Enable channels for dissent and debate

There needs to be a **cultural *Glasnost*** within the Labour Party. In this instance *Glasnost* means realising that a healthy party enables constructive internal debate, diversity of views, and dissent. It means that debates are pointless if everyone agrees. Citizens need space to reflect and political parties should offer this. Labour's traditional deliberative environments, ranging from branch meetings to conference, are too closed and hierarchical to offer such a space. Citizens today have the ability to comment at any time, anywhere on anything from the news to their latest book purchase, or even to sign a Downing Street petition. Labour must develop an open environment for debate and issue-based organisation that is open to the broader population.

3. Give supporters the tools to self-organise

The digital revolution is dramatically changing citizens' expectations. The growing personalisation of media consumption indicates a move away from geographic and temporal constraints on our activities. In this era, defined by the demand for immediacy and the individualisation of experience, it is easy to see why the political environments in some constituency parties, such as overly formal General Committee meetings, often drive away new members.

Obama's campaign proved **the power of self-organisation**, and, to remain competitive, Labour must adopt this approach. Online and offline tools can help to achieve this. Labour currently has, in technical terms, some very good online tools allowing members to publish content, organise and debate ideas with each other. These, however, are kept in a password protected, mem-

Conclusion

bers-only 'walled garden'. As a result, they are only useful for forming networks among those who are already members. These systems should be opened up and developed further, to ensure that broader connections between progressives can be formed.

Offline, this means opening up the institutions of constituency parties. Where CLPs have opened their doors to non-members, the number of activists in election campaigns has spiked. However, examples such as this remain the unusual exception. A more open approach would also help reconnect local communities by providing new, innovative ways to bring people together under the umbrella of the Labour Party.

4. Keep supporters better informed

Obama's campaign proved how effectively new technology can be used to create a genuine link between leadership and activists. It is vital that Labour improves its use of email and other information and communication technology, such as SMS text messaging, to form **an individualised link** with every one of its supporters. Messages should also request action rather than providing a one-way flow of information, as they so frequently do.

5. Reward hard work and entrepreneurialism

The efforts of individual activists need to be recognised, allowing them to progress through the echelons of the Party and to gain more responsibility. Additionally, the Party should consider a move towards **open primaries for candidate selection**. This would have two important impacts. First, it would ensure that the decision was not made by a small body but by everyone in the local community. Second, it would encourage exceptional individuals who have a

The Change We Need

background in broader public service and share Labour's values to step forward and seek office.

We do not pretend that this transition will be easy. But we are sure it is necessary. Without taking these steps there is every risk that the Labour Party as a membership organisation will come to have little, if any, relevance to the lives of British citizens.

Indeed, it seems likely that last year's US election campaign is just the start of a seismic revolution. It is quite possible that the transition to the information age will rival the development of the printing press or of industrialisation as an epoch-forming event. Yet, even within this change, there will still be constants. There will always be people who strive for a fairer society, and those who believe that we can achieve more through common endeavour than we can alone. The question is whether the Labour Party can continue to be a suitable vehicle for these political beliefs. Can we do it?

Yes, we can.