

A History of the Labour Party

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Author: Andrew Thorpe

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Reviewer: Christopher Massey

Andrew Thorpe's fourth edition of *A History of the British Labour Party* provides a much needed update to what has become one of the leading volumes on the Labour Party since its first edition in 1997. The book, spanning 412 pages, provides an engaging read into the history of the Labour Party. Impressively, unlike the vast majority of Labour histories, the entirety of the Party's history is covered in a single, succinct volume. The work is widely referenced with an excellent bibliography, but remains accessible to both academics and non-academics. Thus, Thorpe's book is a must read for any historian, academic, or student interested in the foundation, development and renewal of the Labour Party.

The twists and turns of Labour's electoral fortunes are detailed through 13 chronologically ordered chapters beginning in 1900 and ending in 2015. The fourth edition boasts significant alternations to chapter 12, 'New Labour in power', and features an entirely new chapter on 'Moving beyond Blair', which takes the story up to 2015. This chapter brings the work up to date with Gordon Brown's period of office, the 2010 election defeat, and the election of Ed Miliband. Through no fault of the author's, due to the timing of publication, the book regrettably does not cover the 2015 election and subsequent shift to the Left of the Labour Party, which has parallels with previous incarnations of the Party.

In his introduction, Thorpe lightly touches on the fluctuations in Labour's historiography throughout its first century and, more recently, beyond. He describes such oscillations by analysing the atmosphere in the years of publication. Works published in the late 1940s (Cole, Williams and Tracey) he describes as celebratory, owing to the Party's success in the 1945 election. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Labour was in the first of many long periods out of office; the author categorises publications in this era (Pelling, Howell) as striking a more 'cautious' note on past achievements. However, the recent tone of Labour history studies, Thorpe details, has been increasingly 'upbeat', due to the optimism in the years either side of the 1997 election. Thorpe also briefly describes the major historiographical arguments which have surfaced around Labour's political path, highlighting the wide differences between scholars of the Left (Miliband, Saville and Coates) and of the Right (Marquand). Such debates have often attacked Labour from both sides; however, Thorpe's own assessment follows a path trodden by Tanner, Thane and Tiratsoo namely that Labour's history should be assessed 'against its own aims and values, and against what might have been reasonably expected' (p. 5). Such an approach is undoubtedly helpful as Labour history tries to move on from

ideologically biased accounts to a more balanced, academic assessment of the party's achievements.

The first chapter describes the creation and early years of the Labour Party between 1900 and 1914. This chapter also includes brief descriptions of the development of the Democratic Federation, Independent Labour Party, and Fabian Society before the TUC's decision in 1900 to establish a 'distinct Labour group in Parliament.' However, it was the circumstances created by the First World War which really allowed Labour to come of age. Thorpe states that although the Party by 1914 had not grown very far since the 1906 election, it had provided itself with a firmer base which enabled it to take advantage of the situation presented to it by the outbreak of war (p. 35).

The Labour Party's move towards second party status was directly attributable to changes brought about by the First World War (p. 36), and this is the subject of Thorpe's second chapter. Labour had entered into a wartime Coalition in 1915 under Herbert Asquith, but was later offered better terms in a second coalition, after Liberal infighting, by David Lloyd George. This allowed Labour's leader, Arthur Henderson, to show that Labour could hold down ministerial posts. Thorpe's analysis of Labour's growth in this period rightly attaches great weight to the Party's 'underlying unity', as this allowed it to exploit many of the opportunities offered by the war (p. 40). In addition, he sees the 1918 election result, despite an increase in Labour's representation to 57 MPs, as a pale reflection of the strength of the Labour movement. These developments – with particular weight being attached to the First World War and, to a lesser extent, Liberal disunity – put the Labour Party in a position whereby it was the official opposition to the Conservative Government by 1922.

The progress of the Labour Party in the period following (1922–31) is the focus of the third chapter. The 1924 Labour Government is covered briefly, with Thorpe stating that this administration 'did not achieve much in policy terms.' This, however, as he later alludes to, was unsurprising considering the tenuous hold on power of the minority Government. However, Labour's lack of commitment towards its own stated aims in this period was somewhat striking. Labour's policy development following its fall from office in 1924 was typified by the catch-all 1928 statement *Labour and the Nation*. Thorpe suggests that the Labour movement was too fractious to permit a more concrete appeal and that a 'ruthless delineation of a plan for five years in office', would have led to discontent and dissension. Yet, Labour's success in future years would be centred on such concrete statements as the *Immediate Programme* (1937), and *Let us Face the Future* (1945). The final major event of this period, the split in the Party following MacDonald's decision to form a National Government, is detailed in a balanced account by Thorpe. Regrettably, the shifting historiographical debates around this issue are not detailed here, but do form part of Thorpe's introduction (p. 6).

Chapter four focuses on the remaking of the Party between 1931 and 1939. Labour's ideological progress is detailed ably by Thorpe who highlights the Party's 'piecemeal and qualified shift' to the Left in the early 1930s (p. 87). Equally, the development from the slightly more radical *For Socialism and Peace* (1934) towards the *Immediate Programme* (1937) is depicted by Thorpe as a move towards the 'concrete plans for the implementation' of Labour's policies over a five-year parliamentary term. However, his analysis fails to mention the removal of policies from the 1937 manifesto which had been included in 1934, such as the nationalisation of steel and cotton, which further elucidates Thorpe's own point regarding the short-term nature of Labour's post-MacDonald move to the Left. Following this period, the influence of the Second World War on the Labour Party is described in chapter five. Thorpe describes the catalytic impact of the war in giving the Party the opportunity of competing with the Conservatives. Regarding the historiography of this period, Thorpe dismisses the notion of consensus in these years advocated chiefly by Addison. To rebut this argument the central disagreements between the two major parties are highlighted, such as Labour's commitment to wartime controls and nationalisation. He concludes by stating that although there may have been a 'blurring of the lines' this does not really suggest a consensus as the 'nature of the mixture was still very much open to debate' (p. 113).

Thorpe's analysis of the 1945–51 Governments is the subject of chapter six. He begins the chapter with a

brief summary of the extensive historiography surrounding these Governments, detailing the Left's criticism of Labour's pursuit of socialism, and the Right's disapproval of Labour's preference for welfare reform over other needs. Yet, Thorpe is clear on his own position that this was 'Labour's most successful period in office' (p. 119), which, despite the evangelising of these Governments in some elements of the historiography, is very probably correct. Again, Thorpe is keen to stress the underlying unity of the Party as an aid to its success. He highlights a number of debates which tested such unity, including two issues centring on the issue of steel nationalisation: Alfred Edwards' expulsion, and the Cabinet divide over steel in 1948 (p. 121). However, Thorpe's comments on the 'coolness' of the steelworkers' union towards nationalisation are, in this author's view, slightly wide of the mark, with the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation speaking out in favour of nationalisation at every major stage of the policy's development.⁽¹⁾ Yet it is refreshing to see the issue of steel highlighted here as a major debate in these years. On the whole, whilst being critical of Labour in the areas of housing and education, Thorpe's balanced view that these Governments deserve most of the plaudits that have been given to them, loudly resonates.

The thirteen wilderness years following the 1951 defeat are covered in chapter seven. Thorpe focuses on an ageing leadership, Labour's failure to reform itself culminating in Hugh Gaitskell's failed attempt at scrapping Clause IV, and the Party's struggle to develop new policy, as the chief reasons for Labour's stagnation in this period. However, he believes that accounts of Gaitskell's leadership, written following his untimely death in 1963, have been somewhat exaggerated and states that there is nothing to suggest that a Gaitskell led Government would have been any more successful than Wilson's 1964 administration (p. 158). Wilson's Governments of 1964–70 are the topic of chapter eight. Thorpe touches upon the contrasting reception that Wilson's administrations have been given in the historiography of this period. In some depth he details the succession of problems which these administrations faced. Thorpe recognises that Wilson has come in for strong criticism for devaluing too late, however, he highlights how easy it is to be wise after the event (p. 167).

Labour's crisis years 1970–9 are dealt with in chapter nine. Whilst he recognises the legitimate criticisms made of Labour's 1974–9 governments, Thorpe is keen to highlight the economic circumstances of the period and the fact that Thatcher left office in 1990 with inflation, unemployment, homelessness and crime rates all higher than they had been at the end of Labour's last term of office (p. 207). The Party's path from 1979 is detailed in the following chapter, as Labour struggled for ideological direction after their election defeat. Thorpe describes Labour's 'swing to the Left' in these years, as somewhat limited. Although the Left secured victories on mandatory reselection and the composition of the electoral college, these did not give enormous power to left-wing activists, and instead strengthened the unions' voice inside the Party (p. 214). Moreover, Benn's defeat as Deputy Leader and the loss of the Left's majority on the NEC in 1981 showed that the high-water mark of their influence had passed. Following the election of Neil Kinnock in 1983, Thorpe adroitly details the new Labour leader's two main challenges in his early years: the miners' strike and the Militant Tendency. Thorpe dates the split between the soft-Left and the hard-Left within the Labour Party as taking place during Foot's tenure (p. 219); however, in this author's view, this split actually took place during the years 1985–6, when prominent NEC members – Sawyer, Meacher and Blunkett - moved away from the hard-Left, as a direct result of the Benn/Skinner faction's responses to the two crises identified above.⁽²⁾

Labour's modernisation and the rise of New Labour are detailed in Thorpe's 11th chapter. The Kinnock years in the book could do with expansion, with perhaps a chapter devoted to his efforts in the 1983–92 period, as opposed to half his tenure being attached to the Callaghan/Foot period, and the other half attached to the rise of Smith/Blair. Nevertheless, the major elements of Kinnock's modernisation: the Policy Review, the change to disarmament policy, and the shift to the centre-Left are all covered. Thorpe's analysis on Kinnock's reign is broadly positive, recognising the leader's shortcomings, but ultimately crediting him for leaving the Party in a better position than the one he had inherited in 1983 (p. 236).

During John Smith's short tenure as Party leader, two key structural changes are identified by Thorpe: the implementation of one member one vote (OMOV), and the adoption of all-women short lists for Labour

parliamentary candidates in half of all vacant Labour-held marginal seats. Thorpe is right to highlight the significance of these issues, but does not mention the interconnectivity of them, or detail the very real prospect of defeat for the leadership over the issue of OMOV (p. 241). Smith's victory on OMOV in 1993 was only achieved by the slimmest of margins due to the abstention of the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union (MSF). The MSF had a long-standing commitment to increasing female representation in parliament and their delegation accepted a spurious argument that, due to the OMOV rule change containing a passing reference to all-women's shortlists, they should abstain.⁽³⁾

In a fascinating analysis, the ascent of Blair and his early years as Party leader are covered in some detail by Thorpe. Blair's quick thinking and out-flanking of Gordon Brown are discussed, with the author describing Blair's momentum before the infamous Granita Pact (p. 245). Blair's pursuit of organisational change, typified by his assault on Clause IV, is dealt with equally skilfully, with Thorpe rightly stressing the public relations benefits that the widespread consultation and publicity tour on Clause IV brought to the Party. Reference to Blair's changes to Party organisation are pleasing to see, with Thorpe outlining the move to Millbank Tower, improved relationships with the business world, and the increase in Party membership as particularly noteworthy (p. 254). Other elements of organisational change - the Party into Power project and internal re-organisation and training (typified by training from Cranfield Business School, and highlighted by the award of Investors in People status) ⁽⁴⁾ - could have also been mentioned, but obviously there are limits to how much one short volume on the entire history of the Labour Party can fit within its pages.

New Labour in power is the subject of Thorpe's penultimate chapter. Some of Labour's greatest achievements are detailed such as the national minimum wage, the Good Friday agreement, and increasing economic stability and prosperity. However, these are countered with the views of some of the Party's critics. Blair's second term successes such as Sure Start, and the building of new schools, are also balanced with tentative criticisms of private finance initiatives and the complexities of the new tax credits system. Yet, Thorpe's analysis is that Blair's commitment to eradicating child poverty had a significant impact, and pensioner poverty also fell substantially (p. 270).

Regarding possibly the most contentious issue of the Blair years, the Iraq War, Thorpe describes how Blair's overconfidence - with Britain having played key roles in the resolution of disputes in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Northern Ireland - played a part (p. 274). Yet he is also keen to stress Blair's strong notion of 'right' and 'wrong'. Ultimately, however, the false claims surrounding weapons of mass destruction, deeply damaged Blair's credibility and indeed legacy. Blair left office in 2007 with ongoing problems in Iraq bubbling on the surface, and having lost Labour control in Scotland and Wales; however, a crowning achievement of these years was the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. Thorpe's overall analysis of the Blair years, pleasingly, is largely positive; he states that, although the Party may not have delivered the spiritual renewal some expected in 1997, it brought real improvements to the lives of many people, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable in society (p. 284).

Blair's successes would prove difficult to follow, as highlighted in Thorpe's final chapter, which focuses on Brown's premiership, the 2010 defeat, and the road to 2015. The author is critical of Brown's decision not to hold an election in 2007, stating with accepted hindsight that this was the new leader's best chance of victory (p. 289). Brown's major role in the response to the 2008 financial crisis is praised, but the subsequent recession - although not of his making - would largely damage Labour's future electability and contributed greatly to the 2010 defeat.

Thorpe fascinatingly outlines some of the major advantages which Labour would have 'inherited' at the 2015 election had they been victorious: their inbuilt constituency advantage after the Lib Dems refused to support Conservative plans to redraw boundaries, and also a potential economic recovery from 2015-20, with the Coalition having done most of the heavy lifting (p. 300). This, however, would not be capitalised upon by Labour. Miliband's leadership was categorised by failed plots and a struggle to resonate with the

wider public. Despite his best efforts, the Labour leader could never quite shake the perception that the last Labour government were responsible for the economic recession under which the Coalition had to operate. The timing of Thorpe's publication, unfortunately, leaves the 2015 campaign, and the fascinating Labour leadership election – and staggering swing to the Left – out of this volume. Thorpe's concluding paragraph highlights the need for Labour to embrace 'exciting' but also 'credible' politics in order to recapture the public's imagination and to form a future government (p. 318). The election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader has certainly achieved the first aspect of Thorpe's suggestions, but it remains to be seen whether Labour will realise the second under Corbyn's tenure. Such topics, in this author's view, would provide scope in the years to come for a fifth edition of Thorpe's excellent work.

In conclusion, Thorpe's *A History of the British Labour Party* succeeds in being both a book accessible to the public and one worthy of its place in Labour's academic historiography. What the book lacks in explicit historiographical engagement it more than makes up for through a comprehensive bibliography and the readability of the text. The work is an absolute must-read for Labour history students and scholars. It is the most up-to-date study on the 115-year lifetime of the Labour Party and has this author's highest commendation.

Notes

1. C. Massey, *Public Ownership and the Labour Governments 1945–51: The Case of Steel Nationalisation*, (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Teesside University, 2012). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R.H. Fryer and S. Williams, *Leadership and Democracy: The History of the National Union of Public Employees: Volume 2: 1928–1993*, (London, 2011), p. 427; A. McSmith, *Faces of Labour: The Inside Story*, (London, 1997), p. 121. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. Rentoul, *Tony Blair: Prime Minister*, (London, 2001), p. 139. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. L. Minkin, *The Blair Supremacy: A Study in the Politics of Labour's Party Management* (Manchester, 2014), pp. 200–3. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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