

The `Progressive Turn` in the Discipline of Social Policy

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This paper explores the way in which the notion of progressivism has come to prominence within the Social Administration constituency of the discipline of Social Policy. After detailing the emergence of Contemporary Social Administration (CSA), attention is focussed on the way in which New Labour's notion of progressivism, which was imported from the New Democrats in the United States, has become a dominating narrative for CSA. The paper concludes by drawing attention to some of the significant disadvantages of this `progressive turn`.

From Traditional to Contemporary Social Administration

According to Ramesh Mishra (1977:1989), TSA could be said to have four distinctive characteristics; a focus on national issues and problems, a strong empirical orientation, a Fabian `mindset` and limited theoretical reflection (see also Baker, 1979; Bulmer, Piachaud and Lewis, 1989b).

The focus on poverty and other `social problems` by pioneering social investigators such as Booth and Rowntree laid the ground for later generations of researchers in the developing field of Social Administration both before and after the Second World War. These post-war studies within TSA focused on domestic problems such as the neglected child (Donnison, 1954), older people (Cole with Utting 1962) and large families in London (Land 1969). In part, this reflected the assumption that the origins of such conditions were `parochial` and, as such, required bespoke national solutions. Although some interest was shown in the social conditions and policy responses in Europe and elsewhere (see Harris, 2004), such enquiries tended to be undertaken with a view to the possibility that the importation of a particular policy or service might enhance social welfare in the UK. Given the UK's reputation as a welfare state pioneer there was little expectation, however, that there would be much to gain from studying the arrangements of fledgling welfare nations.

The emphasis on empiricism within TSA owes much to the deep-seated mistrust on the part of early pioneers of what they regarded as unscientific and speculative forms of theorising (see Pinker, 1971). As Mishra (1977) notes, the `appeal to facts` had `a ring of political neutrality and impartiality that ideological positions lack` (p.16).

Indeed, the influential Fabian social investigators Beatrice and Sidney Webb were keen to stress that their commitment to collectivism was based on sound, irrefutable, scientific evidence rather than untested speculation. These early forms of empiricism were devoted primarily to gathering information about prevailing social conditions. As state welfare provision expanded, however, investigations of the efficacy of collective provision were also undertaken (see Taylor-Gooby, 1981).

A Fabian mindset was the third distinctive feature of TSA. Given its applied focus, those associated with TSA were keen to ensure that their endeavours led to improved forms of practice. As Wilding (1983) observes, most of those engaged in TSA believed that

`gradual reformism along classic Fabian lines was the way to change and improve society. State provided social services were seen as the proper mechanism for bringing about progressive change. Enhanced service provision and improved administration were the way forward. There was a common belief that policy making was a rational activity and that if needs were identified and `facts` gathered then `society` would respond with the most appropriate policies to tackle the `problems` that were revealed` (p.5 - see also Mishra, 1977, 70-71).

The key dilemma facing TSA was whether this commitment to state welfare might conflict with dispassionate social scientific enquiry. Titmuss (1974) believed that it was possible to overcome any potential conflict of interest if social researchers were open about their reformist convictions. In practice, the `reformist` standpoint adopted by most TSA researchers did not prove to be a major hindrance to the reputation of the subject. Indeed, there was a prevailing assumption within TSA and beyond that scrupulously conducted social scientific enquiries would inevitably point to the need for more extensive social reform. Accordingly, the value position of the diligent researcher was not seen as having any distorting effect on either the evidence presented or the conclusions drawn from it.

Given the problem-centred focus of TSA, it is not surprising that there was a limited desire to expand the parameters of the subject (though see Harris, 1989). Despite Titmuss' (1958) initial efforts to broaden the subject so that it would encompass the areas of occupational and fiscal welfare (the so-called social division of welfare), this did not lead to any major deviation from detailed studies of social problems and the social services (though see Sinfield, 1978). Moreover, exploratory accounts of the development of the welfare state were few and far between. Only a handful of scholars explored the links between social policy and social theory (see Warham, 1970; Pinker, 1971).

The Challenge to Traditional Social Administration

TSA was, however, buffeted by a series of challenges in the late 1960s and 70s. These took various forms. *First*, the failure of the 1964-70 Labour government to secure social advance by the use of classical `Fabian` means served to undermine the viability of the reformist strategy that underpinned TSA. *Second*, the reformist ethos

of TSA was challenged by neo-Marxist and radical left commentators, neo-liberals, feminists and those from other emerging social movements. *Third*, some scholars felt that the applied, 'reform-orientated' nature of the TSA paradigm was hindering the possibility of enhancing the academic status of the subject. Let us examine each of these challenges in turn.

1. Disillusionment with the 1964-70 Labour Government

When the Labour Party returned to power in 1964 after what was famously termed thirteen 'wasted' years of Conservative rule (Labour Party, 1964), there were high expectations amongst the TSA community that a second phase of social advance akin to the Attlee years of 1945-51 would be implemented. Although post-war Marxist critics such as Miliband (1961) and Saville (1977) had drawn attention to what they saw as the inherent limitations of social reform under capitalism, their reservations had done little to undermine the resolve of those who believed that a reform-minded Labour government committed to progressive taxation and universal social services could create a more egalitarian society (though see Abel-Smith, 1958: Townsend, 1958).

Although Labour set out a positive reform agenda which included commitments to increase the supply of affordable housing, better education, a modernised health service and 'a guaranteed share in rising prosperity' for older people and widows in their General Election manifesto of 1964 (Labour Party, 1964, p.13), they found it difficult to fulfil these pledges when they were returned to office given the adverse economic circumstances they faced (Tomlinson, 2004). Their attempt to combine economic efficiency and social justice proved ineffective and a succession of economic crises finally resulted in a humiliating currency devaluation in 1967. Within TSA circles there was, however, limited questioning about the appropriateness of a Fabian reform strategy *per se*. Rather, it was the lack of commitment to this strategy on the part of the Wilson government that was seen as problematic. Indeed, some of those associated with TSA became directly involved with emerging social movements and newly established campaigning organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter in order to demonstrate their disapproval of what they regarded as a lack of drive and ambition on the part of government (see McCarthy 1986).

Despite making progress in areas such as education and social security, and in liberalising the law relating to homosexuality, divorce and censorship, the 'abiding image' of the 1964-70 Labour government was of one 'beset by criticism from within and without, in many ways doing its best to maintain the welfare state that it had created but, owing to constant economic difficulties, failing to live up to the egalitarian hopes of its supporters' (Ellison 1994: 435). Although some of those engaged in TSA retained their belief in gradualism, doubts were emerging about the long-term viability of this strategy.

2. *Opposition to Fabian Style Reformism*

The late 1960s and 70s was a time in which many of the dominant paradigms and canons in the social sciences were coming under critical scrutiny. The underlying assumption within TSA, that the welfare state was a positive instrument for achieving egalitarian social change, was now subject to growing criticism. Neo-Marxist critics highlighted the contradictory nature of the welfare state in capitalist societies (O'Connor, 1973; Gough, 1979; London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). Attention was drawn to the ways in which the welfare state could act as a form of social control of the poor and disadvantaged in such spheres as social security (George, 1973; Kincaid, 1975) and housing (Ginsburg, 1979). Feminists highlighted the way in which post-1945 Fabian welfare reforms continued to operate on the assumption that financial protection for women (whose principal role was deemed to be that of home maker, wife and mother) was best secured through their husband's employment related insurance contributions (Wilson, 1977). Others drew attention to the 'less eligible status of ethnic minority groups in British society (Sivanandan 1976; Smith, 1977). As Williams (1989) notes, 'The Post-war situation was one where Black men and women from the Commonwealth were brought into the country to solve the labour shortage, but whose access to the welfare services, particularly housing and education, were neither acknowledged nor planned for and often denied. This went largely unquestioned by the labour movement and by academics in social administration' (p.7). TSA assumptions about the benevolent potential of the welfare state were also being challenged by the users of welfare services (see Jordan, 1973) and documentary film makers such as Ken Loach (the producer of *Cathy Come Home*), who highlighted the demeaning treatment that welfare recipients were routinely subjected to whether as benefit claimants, prospective tenants or NHS patients.

TSA was also the subject of a concerted attack from neo-liberals and public choice theorists (see Hay 2007). Since the mid 1950s the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), a right wing think tank, had been challenging Fabian orthodoxies in relation to both economic and social policy (Cockett, 1994; Denham and Garnett, 1998). The IEA argued that costly, monopolistic forms of state welfare posed a threat to consumer choice (Seldon, 1957; Lees, 1961; Peacock and Wiseman, 1964) and undermined the economic and social foundations of the nation (Harris and Seldon, 1977). Public choice theorists such as Tullock (1965) and Buchanan (1986) tapped into public unease about the inadequacies of service delivery by highlighting the way that 'selfless' public officials were supposedly more interested in their own pay and conditions than the needs of those they purported to help. It was contended that there were too few incentives for public servants to contain costs, improve efficiency or enhance service quality. Over time a number of influential Conservative politicians, such as Enoch Powell, Geoffrey Howe and Keith Joseph became persuaded of the merits of reshaping Conservative economic and social policy along neo-liberal lines. Although the Heath government's (1970-74) flirtation with a neo-liberal economic and social agenda proved short-lived, it was not long before a more purposeful challenge was mounted by successive Thatcher administrations (1979-90).

Finally, TSA was criticised for failing to give sufficient attention to both the informal (Finch and Groves, 1983) and voluntary welfare sectors (Gladstone, 1979; Johnson, 1981; Brenton, 1985). Although neo-liberal critiques of Fabian reformism remained largely the preserve of the IEA and its offshoot, the Social Affairs Unit, there were growing calls for a more pluralistic approach to welfare (Hadley and Hatch 1981; Klein and O'Higgins 1985). According to Klein and O'Higgins (1985), for example, it was inadvisable in an era of 'uncertainty' to remain wedded to an inflexible doctrine such as Fabianism. Instead, they argued that enhanced welfare arrangements would emerge if the principle of 'purposeful opportunism' was adopted, which entailed being clear about overall objectives (such as combating health inequalities) but remaining open-minded about whether particular means, such as the NHS, would necessarily achieve such goals.

3 Questioning the Parameters and Assumptions of TSA

Questions were also being raised by those of a more 'theoretical', as opposed to applied, persuasion about the narrow and uncritical underpinning of TSA. Given its historic roots in the training of social workers, TSA had tended to focus on the development of public provision, and the legislative and operational operation of the social services. This was reflected in many of the text books that were recommended for the teaching of undergraduate students in social administration from the late 1950s until the early 1970s (Hall, 1952; Donnison and Chapman, 1965; Slack 1966; Warham, 1970; Forder 1974. Although, as was noted previously, attempts had been made to extend the focus of the subject, TSA had acquired something of a *worthy but dull* reputation, which led one emerging scholar, Peter Taylor-Gooby (1978), to declare that the subject was in the midst of a 'boring' crisis.

The *uncritical empiricism* of TSA was also put under the microscope (Smith, 1988). The charge against empiricism was not about the intrinsic worth of collecting data about economic and social conditions *per se*, but rather the over-emphasis on the 'neutrality' of this process. In true positivist fashion, the rigorous application of scientific methods was assumed to produce sound evidence which could then form the basis of rational policy making. There had been limited questioning about the choice of topics to be investigated or of the value of alternative explanatory frameworks. It appeared that those engaged in TSA were content to gather information on 'commonly recognised' social problems and suggest modifications to the existing pattern of service delivery. The possibility that unmet need might be linked to the impact of the market or broader social conditions was largely ignored.

A new generation of scholars were keen to enhance the *academic status* of TSA by developing more sophisticated forms of conceptual analysis and theory. In part, this was a result of the emergence of more career minded academics within the field. Previously, university staff engaged in teaching and research in Social Administration had tended to have had some practical experience in fields such as social work or the probation service before taking up an academic post. Some even continued to combine public service with their academic roles. For example, Richard Titmuss served as Deputy Chairman of the Supplementary Benefits Commission in the late 1960s while holding a Chair at the LSE. Others left the academy in order to

undertake public service on a full-time basis (Donnison 1982). Such cross-fertilisation came to be regarded as one of the key strengths of TSA. Indeed, some of those who believed most passionately in maintaining strong links between the academy and the real world of welfare were highly critical of the new generation of academics who seemed to be more interested in developing an academically respectable specialism rather than with improving the life chances of the disadvantaged (Donnison, 1985).

In the face of this major onslaught, TSA struggled to survive. By the end of the 1980s TSA had been largely re-branded as Social Policy. Undergraduate and postgraduate Social Administration programmes in the UK re-emerged with a Social Policy motif and text books with Social Administration in the title all but disappeared from view. This change of title reflected the desire of a new generation of academics to expand the parameters of the subject by looking at the wider social, economic and political context of social policy developments. The publication of George and Wilding's book *Ideology and Social Welfare* in 1976 proved to be a landmark in this process, highlighting as it did the need for students of Social Policy to engage with a broader range of ideological approaches thereby avoiding the possibility of becoming unwitting proponents of Fabianism (see also Mishra, 1977; Room, 1979; Taylor-Gooby and Dale, 1981). Neo-Marxist critiques of the welfare state also gained a foothold in the discipline (Gough 1979; Ginsburg 1979; Doyal and Pennell 1979; Corrigan and Leonard 1979; Deacon, 1983) and feminist texts came to the fore (Wilson, 1977; Dale and Foster, 1986; Pascall, 1986).

The Emergence of Contemporary Social Administration (CSA) Within the Expanded Discipline of Social Policy

While some (Glennerster, 1988) feared that the arrival of a more wide ranging theoretically inclined discipline of Social Policy might signal the demise of the more applied TSA perspective, this did not come to pass (though see some of Spicker's reservations, 2004). Far from being overwhelmed, TSA adapted to the challenges it faced both from within the discipline and from a more challenging external environment.

Adaptation

Adaptation to the impact of ideas from both the New Right and welfare pluralists proved crucial to the long-term survival of the Social Administration approach. Previously, those working within TSA had been wary about undertaking research or policy evaluation which might serve to undermine the case for the welfare state or greater equality. For example, the problems that beset the Joint Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS)/Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Working Party on Transmitted Deprivation in the 1970s owed much to the fact that this initiative was intended originally to provide support for the views of Keith Joseph (the Conservative Minister at the Department of Health and Social Security) about individualistic, rather than structural, causes of poverty (Welshman, 2007a). This resistance began to erode.

First, there was a growing recognition that the welfare state had more deep-rooted flaws than had previously been recognised (see Bosanquet, 2009). It was no longer a

case of fine-tuning a basically sound model. Serious consideration was now given to radically different ways of delivering efficient and effective welfare services. Although it can be argued that economic considerations have always been highly influential in TSA, these became even more salient in the 1980s. There was a growing interest in the ways in which both market mechanisms and private sector management techniques might help to reduce the cost, and improve the quality, of state welfare provision (see Le Grand and Bartlett (eds) 1993: Wistow et al, 1996).

Second, there was a growing willingness within the Social Administration community to consider the relationship between individual conduct or values and the pattern of social disadvantage. According to Deacon (2002), TSA had been primarily concerned with the 'structural' causes of disadvantage and had sought to resolve these through reliance on the non-moralistic, mechanical, egalitarian reform strategy promoted by the Labour revisionist Anthony Crosland (1956 - see also Clarke, 1978 and Plant, 1996). Indeed, one of Titmuss' (1974) major influences on the subject was to ensure that structural explanations of disadvantage took precedence over individual explanations. However, the tide began to turn. A growing number of commentators contended that it was necessary to recognise the limitations of structural explanations (see Mann, 1986: Field, 1997) and to engage more fully with the influential individualistic agenda emerging from New Right commentators such as Murray (1984) and Mead (1986 - see also, Deacon and Mann, 1999: Deacon, 2002).

Third, in an era in which the ideas of the centre-right had come to the fore, it is not surprising that the new generation of applied social researchers have become more receptive to the idea that they should be regarded first and foremost as disinterested investigators and analysts rather than Fabian reformers. Previously, those associated with TSA were sometimes viewed with scepticism by other social scientists and civil servants on the grounds that their personal commitment to egalitarianism might impinge on their ability to conduct dispassionate forms of social research (Welshman, 2007a).

Fourth, the increasing emphasis on research performance, fund raising and entrepreneurialism in the university sector since the 1980s meant that those working in TSA were forced to face up to the possibility that research funding might slowly evaporate if steps were not taken to move 'beyond' the 'quasi-Titmuss' paradigm (Deacon, 2002). While there had always been well-established accords between TSA researchers and government departments, the nature of that relationship began to change. The increased need to secure external funding encouraged university departments to cede greater control to funders in relation to the setting of research agendas. This involved the adoption of what Ahmad (2008) has described as a *Contract* as opposed to an *Academic* Think Tank approach (see also Denham and Garnett, 1998: McGann and Weaver, 2002: Rich, 2005). While both approaches share a commitment to scientific rigour, the *Contract* Think Tank approach entails the undertaking of scientific investigations on funder selected topics. In contrast, the *Academic* Think Tank sets its own research agenda and is less concerned with the positive impact that such research might make have on 'official' notions of the public good.

These developments have led to the emergence of what can be termed Contemporary Social Administration (CSA). Given that it has evolved from TSA, it is not surprising that CSA shares some common ground with its predecessor. Like TSA, CSA continues to focus on national issues and problems. While international developments and trends are more intensively scrutinised, the focus remains on their applicability to domestic issues and concerns. CSA has also retained a strong commitment to empiricism. Considerable interest has been shown in the development of ever more sophisticated forms of research instruments and methodologies as the rapid growth of literature in this area confirms (see May, 2003; Bryman and Becker, 2004). It could also be argued that CSA has, like its predecessor, displayed limited interest in 'abstract' forms of theorising (though see Le Grand, 2003, 2007). In part this reflects the sharper division within the broader discipline of Social Policy between those who are more concerned with underlying trends and developments in social policy (see, for example, Fitzpatrick, 2001, 2003; Ferguson et al, 2002; Prideaux, 2005; Clarke et al, 2007) and those who continue to focus more directly on the formation, implementation and evaluation of specific policies (see Atkinson and McKay, 2005; Glasby and Littlechild, 2009 and Glendinning et al, 2009).

There are, however, key differences between CSA and TSA. *First*, within CSA it is no longer accepted, for example, that there should be an exclusive focus on the question of how publicly provided welfare services can be modified and improved to ensure that the needs of service users can be better served by highly skilled professionals with a strong public service ethos. Instead, there has been increased emphasis on welfare reforms that are designed to meet the needs of taxpayers and service users rather than providers (Giddens, 2002; Le Grand, 2007). Indeed, enhanced scepticism about the public-spiritedness of public sector employees (Le Grand, 2003. See also Welshman, 2007b) has led some to suggest that the public interest and user needs might be better served by increased reliance on private providers and quasi-markets as well as 'mutuals, social enterprises, not-for-profit trusts and public benefit corporations' (Giddens, 2002, p.65).

Second, CSA has been much more receptive to individualistic accounts of social disadvantage and, in consequence, to policy initiatives that centre on behavioural rather than 'structural' change. As was noted previously, this could be said to represent a pragmatic accommodation with dominant neo-liberal ideas. Participating in debates about agency may also create opportunities for those working within CSA to challenge and influence dominant 'economic' assumptions in this sphere (see Taylor-Gooby, 2008). Equally, however, it is possible that a more profound 'paradigm' shift has taken place. It can no longer be readily assumed that all CSA researchers will concur with dominant TSA assumptions about the structural causes of poverty and inequality or the transformative potential of a redistributive welfare state. The greater focus on agency is an indicator of this change.

Third, CSA seeks to portray itself as an objective social scientific enterprise as opposed to as an ideologically driven form of study. Although the difficulties of achieving value neutrality in this sphere are acknowledged, it is nonetheless seen as important to strive for an 'independent' rather than 'partisan' reputation. (Walker, 2001). Neutrality of this kind is likely to give rise to an enhanced reputation in academic and governmental circles which may lead to enhanced levels of research

funding.

The possibility that those engaged in CSA might come to be compared to mechanics who are willing to devote countless hours to fine tuning the engine of a train with little or no interest in its final destination has led, however, to a search for some form of over-arching narrative to replace Fabianism. It will be argued here that it is the notion of progressivism, which has filled this void.

Progressivism in Political Context

The demise of communism and scepticism about the long-term viability of both democratic socialist and social democratic ideas has created an ideological vacuum for those on the 'left' who retain a belief in the possibility of progressive change. Although attempts have been made to reformulate these historic doctrines in an effort to demonstrate their continued relevance for modern society, there has been a growing tendency for those in academic, political and policy circles to describe themselves and their ideas as 'progressive' rather than socialist or social democratic. For some on the 'left' this 're-branding' does not constitute an attempt to distance themselves from a commitment to social and political reform. Rather, it is an attempt to emphasise their willingness to consider new means of achieving such reform (see White (ed), 2001 Lawson and Sherlock (eds) 2001).

Given the elasticity of the concept of progressivism, however, it is perhaps not surprising to discover that those subscribing to this tenet are to be found across the political landscape. In particular, there has been a determined effort on the part of a number of 'modern' Conservatives to ensure that those on the right of the political spectrum can also lay claim to the progressive 'logo' (see Clark and Hunt, 2007: Blond, 2009: Osborne, 2009). Indeed, Murray (2009) has even declared that everyone is now a progressive in the sense of preferring tomorrow to yesterday, going forwards rather than backwards, up not down, and building as opposed to "dynamiting" (p.15 - see also Richards, 2009: Hitchens, 2009).

In political terms, progressivism is most closely associated with New Liberal luminaries such as T.H.Green, Hobhouse and Hobson, whose ideas had a significant influence on the reforming Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith between 1906 and 1914. Although the Labour Party, which was established in 1906, initially lent its support to the Liberal's progressive cause, its subsequent decision to take a more overtly class based electoral stance has been seen by commentators such as Marquand (1999) as the key factor in diluting the collective strength of progressive, anti-Conservative forces in British politics. The New Liberals 'classless' endeavours to humanise rather than replace capitalism was developed in the inter-war period by organisations and groupings such as the Next Five Years Group and Political and Economic Planning (see Overy, 2009) and leading 'progressives' such as Macmillan (1938), who popularised the so-called 'middle way' approach (see George and Page, 1995). The emergence of One Nation Conservatism and Labour's 'revisionism' in the 1950s and 60s can also be said to have had 'progressive' roots (see Macleod and Maude, 1950: Crosland, 1956).

It is, however, the New Labour variant of progressivism that is of most significance in terms of understanding the progressive turn in Contemporary Social Administration (Leggett, 2005). The sudden death of Labour leader John Smith in May 1994 provided his successor Tony Blair and his fellow 'modernisers' with a gilt-edged opportunity to re-brand the Party along the 'progressive' lines pioneered by the New Democrats in the United States. The prefix New was attached to the Labour motif, the historic constitutional commitment to public ownership (Clause Four) was abandoned (see Anderson and Mann, 1997), socialism based on class interest and state ownership was replaced by social-ism (values and beliefs - see Richards, 2004) and, on the advice of New Democrat pollster Stan Greenberg (2009), a semi-detached relationship with the trade unions was forged. While these re-branding measures were of importance, New Labour recognised that they also needed to adopt a distinctive progressive narrative that resonated with middle class beliefs in the work ethic, getting ahead and playing by the rules (Gould and Hewitt, 1993).

They embraced the three overarching and inter-locking themes that had been promoted by the New Democrats - responsibility, opportunity and community. By emphasising the *responsibilities* of the citizen, the New Democrats sought to counter the charge that they were un-American, rights-based liberals. Instead they were now to be the Party that would protect the tax dollars of hard working families by ensuring that all welfare benefits for non-working adults would be conditional on the exercise of responsible behaviour.

The emphasis on *opportunity* served a number of key purposes. First, it sought to convey to the American electorate that the New Democrats would focus on the pursuit of equality of opportunity not equality of outcome. This latter objective had come to be associated with a burgeoning bureaucracy, ineffective social programmes and unprincipled pandering to special interests. The New Democrats wanted to 'reinvent' government of an enabling kind rather than one that redistributed resources or saw its task as providing ever more costly public services (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Importantly, however, the New Democrat approach to opportunity was also intended to reassure the electorate that they were the Party who believed that it was legitimate and desirable for government to enhance opportunities for all in contrast to their Republican rivals who believed that individuals should make their own way in life without any form of state support (see Critchlow, 2007).

The New Democrats also laid great stress on the notion of *community* believing that the promotion of individualism by both social and economic Liberals from the 1960s to the 1980s had increased the levels of self-interest and selfishness in society thereby weakening civic attachments and activities. The promotion of active citizenship and strong support for the voluntary sector also enabled the Democrats to distance itself from the criticism that they were overly committed to statism.

The reform of social assistance was one of the central planks of New Democrat re-positioning. By disassociating itself from an unconditional, rights based form of social assistance ('ending welfare as we know it'), the New Democrats sought to establish their 'modern' credentials with the American public during Clinton's

Presidential campaign in 1991. Welfare reform featured prominently in the Party's television advertisements especially during the last few weeks of the campaign in an effort to convince moderate 'swing' voters that the Party had changed direction (Galston, 2008).

The choice of welfare reform as a key issue was salient for two main reasons. First, by the early 1990s the American public appeared willing to impose stringent conditions on the growing number of 'undeserving' welfare claimants even if this might have an adverse effect on the well being of children living in poor households (see Weaver, 2000 on the 'dual clientele' issue). Second, this tough approach towards those on welfare did not necessitate signing up to the more extreme kinds of reform advocated by commentators such as Charles Murray (1984), who favoured the blanket withdrawing of state financial support for groups such as lone mothers. Significantly, the New Democrats tougher stance on social assistance was combined with strong support for Earned Income Tax credits which were designed to bolster the incomes of the *working* poor. The reforms could thereby be presented as part of an opportunity enhancing strategy for those prepared to accept a 'hand up rather than a hand out'.

While a strong and explicit commitment to welfare reform was seen as the key way for the New Democrats to engage with wavering middle class voters, New Labour found that this issue did not give them the same degree of electoral traction with the middle class as either tax restraint (no increases in income tax rates) or strict spending controls (agreeing to adhere to tight Conservative spending constraints during their first two years in office). Nevertheless, they believed that their appeal to aspirational voters would be enhanced if they demonstrated a clear determination to demand more from those depending on welfare benefits. The emphasis on conditional rather than unconditional 'welfare' support formed the core of Gordon Brown's 'New Deal' proposals for young people, which were trailed in 1993 before being 'hammered home in countless speeches and radio and television appearances during the 1994-1997 period' (Keegan, 2003, pp.139-40).

It was only after their General Election victory in May 1997 that New Labour set about trying to develop a more robust defence of their embrace of New Democrat thinking on such issues as welfare reform. This took the form of a so-called 'third way' political narrative which attempted to justify their changing approach to welfare arrangements on the basis of broader forms of economic and social change rather than electoral considerations (Blair, 1998: Giddens, 1998: 2001. See also, White, 2005). Having rejecting the transformative ethos of democratic socialism whilst retaining the idea that social 'problems' could still be resolved by a combination of government, community and individual action, New Labour sought to re-position itself as a 'progressive' party along New Democrat lines. In the new global environment identified by New Democrat thinkers such as Robert Shapiro (2008), New Labour contended that government could no longer offer citizens employment or income guarantees. Instead, government should focus on combating unjust forms of discrimination and removing opportunity barriers. In this new environment, citizens would be expected to seize opportunities and maintain financial independence through paid work (See DSS, 1998 and Blunkett, 2001).

The gradual transition from TSA to Contemporary Social Administration (CSA) ensured that the latter was well positioned to respond positively to New Labour's progressive policy agenda. Importantly, those engaged in CSA were prepared to accept the terms and conditions that the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett set out in an ESRC lecture for government sponsorship of social science research. For Blunkett only those members of the social science community who were prepared to engage positively (or even *positivistically* - see Hodgkinson, 2000) with issues and concerns that the government deemed relevant would be offered support. He also made it clear that researchers would need to display sensitivity to prevailing public sentiments and avoid drawing controversial conclusions that would only serve to irritate or antagonise the average citizen. There was no longer to be a place for 'ideology paraded as intellectual inquiry or critique'. Evidence-based policy formed a central part of New Labour's progressive mission. By emphasising its commitment to rigorous social scientific evidence, it hoped to convince the wider electorate that it had distanced itself from the 'value-laden' forms of policy making favoured by previous post-war governments (see Davies et al, 2000 and Young et al, 2002). New Labour's unwillingness to acknowledge the inherent limitations of social scientific forms of enquiry (Bishop, 2007) coupled with its 'managerialist and mechanistic way of thinking about policy making' (Parsons, 2002, p.57: see also, Davies et al, 2000: Newman, 2001) did not seem particularly troubling to the CSA community. It seems likely that they were in broad agreement with the 'determinist' sociological accounts of economic and social change offered by influential commentators such as Beck (1992: 2009) and Giddens (1994: 1998: 2000). They also responded positively to New Labour's more eclectic approach to service delivery. Indeed, it is noticeable how some within CSA (see, for example, Le Grand, 2007) have begun to operate in ways more akin to policy entrepreneurs.

The embrace of 'progressivism' within CSA has had a number of advantages. The unwavering belief in 'modernisation' (see Finlayson, 2003: Powell, 2009), the acceptance that policy formation should be based on the 'public interest' rather than the particular needs of disadvantaged groups and the rejection of outmoded ideological stances has unquestionably enhanced the reputation of the subject within government circles and beyond. However, there are significant disadvantages. Sinfield (2004), for example, has cautioned against an over-emphasis on 'downstream' enquiries 'with their more individualised focus on those trapped below or on the margins' of society (p.10). Ellison (2004) has raised fears that the discipline might be 'in the process of being reorganised by government for narrow political ends as a sort of research "service industry"' (p.12). Indeed, there does appear to be a very real danger that the embrace of 'progressivism' might make it extremely difficult to challenge what Galbraith (1958) famously termed the 'conventional wisdom' (see Milburn, 2009). There are already signs that policy debates might be conducted within unduly narrow parameters. Glendinning's (2008) conclusion to her comprehensive review on the issues of choice and control for older and disabled people provides just such an example of this process.

'The wider social and cultural influences of individualism and consumerism in post-industrial societies cannot be ignored; some of the changes in social care ... are likely

to be *irreversible*. In particular, a return to a situation where a limited range of social care services in kind are allocated on the basis of professional judgments about need and eligibility is *unthinkable*' (p.466) [italics added].

While Glendinning's predictions may prove prophetic, there is a danger that the ready embrace of a 'progressive' standpoint will have negative repercussions in the longer term. For example, supposedly benevolent ideas such as the 'personalisation' of health and social care services may give rise to an 'agreed' set of narrow policy prescriptions which may prove highly disadvantageous to service users and providers in the longer term (see Beresford, 2008; McGibbin, 2009). In particular, it is noticeable how the needs of public sector welfare workers have tended to be marginalised within Contemporary Social Administration. For example, while partnerships and compacts between service sectors have been promoted, little attention being paid to fostering the mutual interests of service users and providers.

Finally, it may well transpire that a challenge to the progressive turn in Contemporary Social Administration, on a par with the previous challenge to Traditional Social Administration, will be required if the negative consequences of the 'progressive turn are to be reversed.

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