

## Raymond Plant and the British Social Democratic Tradition

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It is a great honour and privilege to be giving this lecture in tribute to Raymond Plant, Lord Plant of Highfield.

Not only is Raymond a distinguished scholar who has made a major theoretical contribution in multiple fields (political philosophy, social democratic thought and jurisprudence) and made a major practical contribution (in the Labour Party, think tanks and charities), but is also a friend who I have had the pleasure to know for a quarter of a century.

I first got to know Raymond as he became my PhD supervisor at Southampton University in 2000 on his return from being the Master of St Catherine's College, Oxford. His supervision was exemplary and my meetings with him were rather like going on an intellectual journey as, with my encouragement, we talked about various aspects of political theory including Hegel and Rawls, as well as extensive personal anecdotes which he would share in a self-effacing way.

Since obtaining my PhD in 2002 we have continued to keep in touch and he has been a source not only of intellectual stimulation but also practical help at numerous times throughout my career.

I somewhat took his supervision for granted at the time as I believed that this is what normal PhD supervision was like. It is only with hindsight that I fully realized how special that supervision was and he remains perhaps the greatest mind I have encountered in academia.

I stress all this not only because I want to put on record my feelings, but also because much of what follows is going to be rather critical. For I have come to realise that while I would still classify myself as a social democrat (or democratic socialist) I have a very different notion of what that ideology entails to the one which he set out and that underpinning this are some key differences over values, or more precisely perhaps the hierarchy of values, within social democracy. I stress that it is my views which have changed here. Raymond's views have remained remarkably consistent over many years and he has been able to defend them robustly from criticisms from different quarters over that time.

## **Plant's contribution to British social democracy**

Plant was born in Grimsby into a working-class family. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, it provided him with a rootedness which enabled him to escape an idealised view of the working class which some on the radical left hold. Secondly, he got to know the local MP from the 1959 General Election onwards, Tony Crosland, who was the leading Labour Party intellectual of the post-war era.

Crosland strongly influenced Plant and his articulation of social democracy in the 1980s was strongly Croslandite, though also adding that Crosland had failed to provide an ethical basis for socialism. Plant, I think, saw it as his mission to provide such an ethical case for social democracy in face of the New Right.

In the context of Thatcherite success in the 1980s (and the rise of neoliberalism internationally) it was natural that Plant would respond to the ideas of its key thinker, Hayek. Plant rebutted, I think successfully, the claims of Hayek on seeing liberty as essentially the absence of coercion, that social justice was a mirage and that rights did not extend to the welfare state.

Plant's social democracy was itself strongly liberal. It was based on the idea of citizenship in which individuals had rights which extended to welfare provision and allowed them to exercise their positive, or practical, liberty.

Plant had previously written on the concept of community and found it rather lacking. Instead, his approach to social democracy was based on rights buttressed with reference to Rawlsian philosophy.

After Labour's third successive General Election defeat in 1987, the ideas which Plant articulated started to shape policy and Labour became a party committed to extending individual freedom and the satisfaction of rights claims. The market would be given a greater role in the welfare state as individual choice was prioritized over a cooperative ideal of participating in a communal welfare state.

The Labour Party became strongly pro-European and embraced constitutional reforms, including the establishment of a committee looking into changing the voting system for Westminster elections chaired by Plant himself.

Although he may well deny this, his ideas fed into the Third Way of New Labour, even though Plant was himself critical of the ambiguity over New Labour's position on equality.

### **Restoring the idea of community**

I wish to argue that while such positioning was a natural response to the challenge of neoliberalism, this more liberal form of social democracy is largely irrelevant and unhelpful in the context of contemporary Britain.

This is because there has arguably been an inflation of rights claims. The left in Britain today has in some ways become a mirror image of Thatcherism seeing individual choice as the end goal of politics, extending far beyond the realm of consumer goods and into areas of personal life. It has instead been conservatives of various kinds who have defended notions of the common good, shared identity and personal responsibility.

John Gray, himself a neoliberal and supporter of Thatcherism in its 1980s heyday, has argued that we now face what he terms 'hyperliberalism' – an ideology which stresses individual choice and personal satisfaction in everything while also being intolerant of anyone who challenges their worldview.

The Labour Party, and the left more generally, struggles to fashion a strong sense of patriotism – especially in relation to England, which it views with suspicion if not outright hostility and few now defend the traditional model of the constitution.

This is all in contrast to the dominant view in the Labour Party for four decades after it first secured a majority in the House of Commons.

That tradition was strongly patriotic, drawing on thinkers such as George Orwell. Successive Leaders were proudly patriotic and this is seen each time it has won a landslide election victory – be it 1945 with its explicitly national rather than class appeal, or the 'white heat' of Harold Wilson's technological revolution. New Labour had a particular form of patriotism in 1997 with its idea of 'New Britain'. The current Labour leadership has also sought to present itself as a national party,

though critics would suggest that there is something rather hollow about the current manifestation of patriotism in the Labour Party.

Labour historically sought to defend the Westminster model of British politics on the basis that even if it meant long periods of Opposition, it would be elected with a clear mandate and a parliamentary majority under First Past the Post to implement socialism. Constitutional reforms were viewed with suspicion because they would reduce Labour's ability to introduce social and economic reforms for the benefit of the working class. New Labour was exceptional in this regard since it did start out with a series of radical constitutional reforms.

While Old Labour was largely Eurosceptic (albeit with some prominent pro-Europeans within it), the party began to move in a pro-European direction from the late 1980s. The extent of this was seen in the referendum on leaving the EU in 2016 when few Labour MPs campaigned for Leave and the party struggled to come to terms with the outcome. Again, the party could have looked to its Eurosceptic tradition, but this had been crowded out.

It is to this more collectivist tradition that Labour must look to as it seems to be on the verge of returning to office for the first time in 14 years next month. In place of the individualistic liberal form of social democracy which became dominant within the Labour Party from the 1980s onwards, it needs to rediscover its communitarian past including the national community.

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