

Austerity and Modernisation, One Nation Labour - Localism, the Economy and Vocational Education and Training⁽¹⁾ in England

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Abstract

The paper addresses national and global questions concerned with neoliberalism, social democracy and social justice. It explores a number of themes that arise from the British Labour Party's policy review and its rebranding as One Nation Labour (ONL). In particular it addresses ONL's approach to the economy, localism and vocational education and training in England by drawing a comparison with the policies of the Coalition government and New Labour. It argues that the policies of ONL are by no means new with many of these found in New Labour and the Coalition. It is suggested that the aspirations of ONL to refashion social democracy for austere times is compromised by the inherent capitalist nature of the economy. This poses the question as to how far the interest in social justice can be furthered in such circumstances.

Key words: vocational education and training, One Nation Labour, Coalition, New Labour, Social democracy, neoliberalism, social justice

The paper examines the British Labour Party's⁽²⁾ policy review and its rebranding as One Nation Labour (ONL). Specifically it explores ONL's stance towards the economy, localism and vocational education and training and in doing so examines continuities with New Labour and the current Coalition⁽³⁾ government. On one level the paper could be seen as addressing the parochial concerns of a particular political party seeking to gain electoral advantage. Yet on another level the paper examines not only national but global questions concerned with neoliberalism, social democracy and social justice as well as what may lie beyond neoliberalism. Such questions explore the nature of the state and responses to current conditions, with the English interest in localism being a case in point. Importantly, Goodson (2014) reminds us that neoliberalism is not all of a piece and is accented, or in his terms,

'refracted' by history as well as the socio-economic and political conditions facing the specific social formation. Thus, for example neoliberalism is refracted in qualitatively different forms in Finland, Spain and Greece compared to its expression in the US and England. Goodson suggests that whilst the former countries were putting in place their models of welfarism in the 1970s and 1980s the latter countries were establishing their versions of neoliberalism - Thatcherism and Reaganomics. In addition Goodson suggests that because of histories of occupation and dictatorship the former countries are better placed to resist or at least subvert neoliberalism and its austerity programmes. The point is that neoliberalism is accented by its sociocultural location.

Current conditions of austerity allied with the shift of economic power to the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) nations pose questions about the economy, the preferred variety, if any, of capitalism and the way in which the state should respond to this context. These are issues that confront western states and transnational bodies such as the European Union in its attempt to construct an educational policy space (Jones, K. 2013a; Lawn and Grek, 2012; and see Apple, 2013). The preceding questions not only confront the English state, and in the context of this particular discussion the Labour Party, but also have a much broader global significance, albeit 'refracted' by socio-economic location.

At the time of writing the British Labour party is positioning itself for a General Election in 2015. The conservative press has labelled Miliband, the current leader of the Labour party, as Red Ed with other commentators suggesting that the party has recovered its socialist roots (*The Economist*, 2013; Holehouse, 2013). However, it is as well to be wary of these attributions as they are often unduly rhetorical and reflect political posturing and sloganeering as much as anything else. Indeed there is a broad alliance within the Labour party that argues that it should reassert its radicalism (Wintour and Mason, 2014; Letters, 2014). This paper considers Labour's One Nation Project and its attempts to forge a putatively new settlement. In particular it considers the party's construction of the economy, and within this particular context, its position on localism and vocational education and training (VET). To contextualise the debate the paper draws on the writings of the

‘intellectuals’ of the party who have contributed to its policy review⁽⁴⁾ (Ball and Exley, 2010). There is a concern to re-shape and modernise the state in austere conditions and to set the foundations for the polity to move beyond a context in which restrictions on public spending and the reduction of the deficit constrain policy development. Although an international readership may be unfamiliar with a number of those I cite, what is important is that the debates engaged with represent an attempt to respond to conditions of austerity and neoliberalism and thereby have global significance.

The starting point for the discussion lies with the Labour party’s electoral defeat in 2010 and its concern to refashion itself to address current conditions. Importantly, this reflects a discursive positioning in which it seeks to distinguish itself not only from the Conservative led Coalition but also from Blair and Brown’s New Labour. The electoral defeat was attributed to the failings of New Labour - its technicism, its over reliance on state centralism and the market. Allied to this critique was New Labour’s metropolitanism, perhaps best embodied in the figure of Blair. Cruddas, an MP who leads Labour’s policy review, suggested that “our [New Labour] progressive cosmopolitanism tends toward an inability to comprehend the deep desire for the familiar and the parochial; the ordinary” (2013a, np). Such a stance had led to the marginalisation of long standing Labour traditions of mutualism, community, collectivism and localism which ‘blue’ Labour⁽⁵⁾ is seeking to reinstate (Glasman, Rutherford, Stears, and White, 2011; and see White 2011, p131-132)

There are a number of tensions in this account, not least the question of localism which came to the fore towards the end of New Labour’s period in office (Avis, 2009). These notions seek to mark out a new terrain that is distinctive from the party’s immediate past and seek to resonate with its imagined roots in the labour movement. Yet at the same time there are very clear continuities with the Labour party’s immediate past, and the resurrection of themes featured in its policy review of the 1980s as well as Blair’s New Labour. In this instance there is a strong resonance with earlier modernisation agendas, with the critique of New Labour representing a rebranding rather than an outright rejection (Wickham-

Jones, 2013). This is notwithstanding the critiques embodied in the ONL policy review.

In much the same way as it critiques New Labour, ONL construes the Tory led Coalition as being socially divisive and elitist - on the side of the rich and powerful and validating the pursuit of greed and avarice. The Coalition is thus seen as the party of capital seeking to secure the interests of the rich as opposed to 'ordinary' hard working people and the 'squeezed middle'. Wood⁽⁶⁾ writes:

If we are to raise our game on the productivity front, we need to have a different approach to wealth creation at home... It means filling out the middle of the hourglass economy, based on a hard-headed realisation that we will not be able to compete without a radically different approach to competing in the global economy.(2013, p4)

But again caution is required for not all capital is viewed as problematic, merely those sectors that seek excessive profit. Thus we confront a responsible capitalism that is to be encouraged and welcomed set against a casino capitalism characterised by the speculative practices of the financial sector as well as energy suppliers who take unfair advantage of their oligopolistic position to distort the market (Miliband, 2012a, no page number). As against irresponsible capitalism there is, at least according to Miliband, an alternative rooted within a social democratic politics, in much the same way as it was for Labour's third way politics (Giddens, 1998).

For ONL the Coalition shares with New Labour a number of negative features, the tendency towards centralism, perhaps best illustrated by Gove's (the current secretary of state for education) Academies programme, which whilst celebrating school autonomy locates this within the centralising structures of the state. The consequence is that the relationship between schools and their locality in relation to democratic accountability is undermined (but see BBC News, 2013⁽⁷⁾). As with New Labour there is an over-reliance on markets to deliver socially beneficial outcomes. But in addition society is characterised by increasing polarisation of income and wealth and an embattled working/middle

class facing a declining standard of living. The nostrum that increasing the wealth of the rich leads to a trickle-down effect thereby benefiting the poor has been shown to be illusory. British society is viewed as comprising two nations, marked by extremes of poverty and wealth in much the same way as it was for Disraeli (1845).

One Nation Labour

The party's recent history could be seen as a search for a politics or slogan that could lead to electoral success. The 'British promise' was one such theme, the notion that the next generation would do better than its predecessor and have a higher standard of living – a promise that has been broken in recent times (Miliband, 2011). 'Predistribution' another of these themes - the embedding of greater levels of fairness and access to privileged positions and so minimise the need for redistribution (Miliband, 2012b). There is an echo of Giddens' conceptualisation of the social investment state, whereby "the cultivation of human potential should as far as possible replace after the event 'redistribution'" (1998, p101).

ONL seeks to forge a new consensus, settlement or indeed a new common sense. It intends to construct a new sense of national purpose, of the common good. In pursuit of this end it appropriates the language of 'one nation' from Disraeli (1845) and Cameron's progressive Conservatism's concern with wellbeing (see Blond, 2010; Hunt 2013a). In 2007 Dorey noted that,

David Cameron has toiled tirelessly during his first year as Conservative leader to reposition the Party ideologically, and revive the 'one nation' strand which atrophied during the 1980s and 1990s. (p162)

Kettle (2013) writing in *the Guardian* following Cameron's party conference speech, goes so far as to suggest that he "is and always has been: a one-nation Conservative who is still seeking [to combine] the vigour of market economics with social justice and social responsibility". The point is that not only are there continuities between Blair/Brown's New Labour and ONL, but also an articulation with Cameron's Conservatism. The ONL critique is that the Conservatives

are the party of irresponsible capitalism and have placed too great an emphasis on the market and a neoliberal version of capitalism. Blair/Brown, ONL and Cameron politics are marked by opportunism, pragmatism, as well as conceptualisations of what is possible and politically expedient. Despite contradictory positioning these politics are firmly located within the terrain of capital.

Labour's One Nation project could be seen as the construction of a social democratic politics suited to 'tough' times. There are significant continuities with New Labour's third way (Blair, 1998; Giddens, 1998).

It was a bold speech by the party leader at the annual conference, one that mapped out an ambitious 'One Nation' agenda. A few days later, Labour's deputy leader picked up the theme explicitly: 'we are the party that speaks for the whole of the country, that will govern for the whole country. (Wickham-Jones, 2013, p321)

Wickham-Jones is drawing our attention to speeches made not by Miliband but Blair and his deputy Prescott in the 1990's. It may be that the notion of 'One Nation' is vacuous but it serves to provide rhetorical support for policies derived from the centre left and right. Both Blair and Miliband were attempting to construct a politics that suited the conditions they faced and were concerned to mark up the distinctiveness of their stance. Thus for Blair,

There is a dreadful irony that at the height of Thatcherism, when the central idea of the neo-liberal Right was to place individual choice above all other values, the old Left became a mirror image of the Right. It stressed social rights to the exclusion of individual responsibilities, just as Thatcherism stressed individual economic rights to the exclusion of social responsibility. (Blair, 2002 np)

Blair and New Labour emphasised the importance of rights and responsibilities. Indeed the Labour Party's *Vision for Growth* published in 1996 stated,

A successful modern economy must be based on partnership rather than confrontation. We want to rebuild a **one nation society based on reciprocal rights and duties**. The central principle underpinning

Labour's vision of a stakeholder economy is inclusion. (my emboldening, Labour Party, 1996, p6)

There is a clear continuity between this notion of “a one nation society based on reciprocal rights and duties” and ONL themes of mutualism, reciprocity and allied notions of social responsibility (Bale, 2013, p347). Cruddas states, “these are the new rules of the game. To rebuild a sense of duty and responsibility so as to rebuild the country” (2013a, np; and see 2013b)

ONL consistently draws our attention to the fiscal crisis, the deficit and thus the necessity to manage expectations in ‘tough’ times. In times of austerity we should ‘think smart’ and place people and their communities in charge of finding solutions which will be ‘smarter’ and more cost efficient than those derived from the central state (Cruddas, 2013c; Mulgan, 2012). In order to attain this goal it will be necessary to reform public services facilitating a shift in power away from the central state to the locality/community, thereby enabling the community to shape the public services it requires.

But too often we thought that a delivery state powered by choice and competition was the only answer to better and more productive public services. It isn't. We did not devolve enough meaningful power to front line services and their users. We tended to underplay local place and that what mattered was giving those who used and worked in our hospitals and schools a greater sense of ownership. We did not protect the relationships and trust that lie at the heart of public services. (Cruddas, 2013c np)

For Mulgan's (2012) this represents a move away from a delivery to a relational state, one more concerned with social relations than the provision of services which are devolved to empowered communities.

For Mulgan, the relational state is one that sees its role as being less about delivering services *for* or *to* the public and more about working *with* people to solve shared problems. This means rewiring the state to improve relationships, but particularly the relationship *between the state and the people*. (Cooke and Muir, 2012, p10)

Here notions of co-production and co-creation are drawn, on together with concepts of locality, democracy and user empowerment - all of which have an important part to play in the development of the relational state (Mulgan, 2012, p23). There are several issues that cohere around conceptualisations of the relational state as well as moves towards localism and community empowerment that need to be considered (see Avis, 2009). Hodgson and Spours (2012) suggest there are at least three models of localism: the centrally managed localism of New Labour; the laissez-faire localism of the Coalition; and democratic localism where there is a rebalancing of powers from the centre to the locality (p201-2). Although moves towards localism reputedly enhance democratic decision making they may at the same time exacerbate local and regional inequalities (Stears, 2012). Such consequences serve to undermine, or at least question, localism's progressive credentials. For example, those living in different regions or communities will have differential access to various forms of capital, whether these are social, human or financial. Thus, rather than contributing to the development of a fairer and more egalitarian society, the opposite may occur, with regional and local power imbalances and inequalities being exacerbated. Different regions or locales may well try to secure their advantage over other areas. The distinctive features of localised labour markets and employment structures will in much the same way contribute to regional inequalities. Such processes impact upon the provision of VET and may serve to open-up or close-down opportunities for learners. This is particularly the case with VET and the desire of Coalition and Labour party policy makers to place the needs of employers at the centre of provision. Localism whilst having progressive possibilities is Janus like, in as much as it can as readily lead to "the reproduction of class privilege and power through polycentric governance" (Harvey 2013, p82) as to its interruption. Indeed Harvey goes so far as to suggest that,

Neoliberal politics actually favors both administrative decentralization and the maximization of local autonomy...
Decentralization and autonomy are primarily vehicles for producing greater inequality through neoliberalization. (Harvey, 2013, p82, 83)

The point is, despite the appropriation by the left of localism and community based struggles, it is important to acknowledge that these

are not necessarily progressive. The devolved provision of English schooling and curriculum in the 1920s/30s is a case in point. In this instance teacher and local autonomy were conceived as a bulwark against socialist incursion (see Grace, 1987, p207; and Apple's, 2013, not dissimilar argument, p2). There are two points to be made. Firstly, the local is a site of struggle and it is noteworthy that there have been successes by the left, the anti-academies alliance being an example (Smith 2011; see for example <http://antiacademies.org.uk/>). Secondly, in discussions concerned with VET and its relationship to localism the aim is to place the needs of employers at the centre of provision consequently the contradictory interests and antagonisms between labour and capital is played down.

Whilst the tenets of capitalism are set in place, ONL construes capital as not all of a piece, calling for a responsible capitalism that features relational and democratic practices in which productive capital is central. This is allied to a call for a 'social' economy of mutual give-and-take, characterised by a sense of justice in which 'no one takes too much or gives back too little'. Cruddas notes, "A social economy is bound by the mutual give and take of reciprocity and a sense of justice that no-one takes too much and gives back too little back" (2013b, np).

In contrast 'Neoliberal' capitalism is seen as pathological or even criminogenic, its short termism and feverish pursuit of profit is thought to be dysfunctional for wider society. These ideas correspond with those of responsible capitalism as well as to the analyses of 'blue' Labour. White illustrates this,

Radical conservatism [blue Labour] shares this sense of loss, of a degradation of human labour under the conditions of a profit-maximizing capitalism. It supports the aspiration for an economy that can better respect work-related identities and sources of personal meaning...

By contrast, an economy which seeks to maximize profit will produce a gravely imbalanced society where the plurality of proper social goals and values get subordinated to the creation of an investible surplus. (The surplus itself need not then be invested in the real economy, of course, but might fuel asset bubbles.) (White 2011, p 127)

Whilst these ideas are drawn from ONL such notions also informed discussions of responsible capitalism in the immediate period after the Second World War (see Jones, G., 2013, p17-29). More importantly, they were a feature of New Labour politics in the 1990s and are present in the significance attached to the work of Will Hutton and his notion of stakeholder capitalism (Hutton, 1995; and see Blair, 1996). This idea was taken up by Blair but failed to take root at the time because of the difficulties faced by the German economy and its model of the social market (Avis, 1998; Wickham-Jones, 2013). However, many of Hutton's criticisms (1995, 1997, 2010) concerning the failings of British capitalism remain in place – its short termism, failure to invest for the long term, a lack of an industrial strategy, the failure to develop an up-skilled labour force allied to an inadequate skill training system. All of these themes are present in ONL.

A reconfigured economy loosely based on a social market economy is believed would overcome the failings of the British model of capitalism with its neoliberal tendencies. This argument returns to the contrast between a good or responsible capitalism set against a bad or irresponsible one. The dominance of the city and financial services in British capitalism distorts the economy and necessitates some re-balancing. New Labour failed to take-up the notion of stakeholding, or indeed pursue the development of a German style industrial democracy based upon co-determination. At this time finance capitalism and the city appeared successful and there was no sense of urgency or perceived need to re-order the economy. In the current conjuncture Germany's economy is doing well. However, the English economy's over dependence on financial services and the long term consequences of Thatcherite de-industrialisation is thought to threaten economic wellbeing and wider society. This has spurred a renewed interest in the social market economy that features co-determination and co-operation between labour and capital. This sits alongside social democratic concerns with less pronounced inequalities of income and wealth which is thought to contribute towards societal wellbeing and social cohesion (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). However it is important to recognise that capitalism is a dynamic system and that whilst the German social market model appears to be doing well this does not necessarily mean that it

will continue to do so. For example, Solow points towards the development of part-time low waged employment and suggests that the German social market model faces a number of threats – the growth of the service sector, the weakening of trade unions, intensified competition, outsourcing, as well as the decline of corporatist ideas (Solow, 2008, p13). ONL discussions suggest there are several varieties of capitalism, with Anglo-liberal capitalism (Hay, 2013) being the least benign rooted as it is in neoliberalism. Whilst it may be somewhat disingenuous to play down the autonomy of national states to shape economic policy and labour markets it is nevertheless important to recognise that capitalism is capitalism and operates within a global economic system. Harvey reminds us,

All enterprises operating in a capitalist economy are subject to “the coercive laws of competition” that undergird the capitalist laws of value production and realization...

So worker controlled or cooperative enterprises tend at some point to mimic their capitalist competitors... It can all too easily happen that workers end up in a condition of self-exploitation that is every bit as repressive as that which capital imposes. (2013, p122)

ONL, in much the same way as New Labour, seeks to construct a softer more ‘egalitarian’ form of capitalism that contributes to societal and economic wellbeing. Consequently it plays down the contradictions and logic of the capitalist system. However in other respects ONL mirrors the arguments of Kaletsky (2010), Hutton (2010) and Sainsbury (2013) who suggest neoliberal capitalism has reached its limits with its contradictions necessitating the development of a new socio-economic settlement. For ONL such a settlement would forge a new consensus, common sense and national purpose. Echoing this, Hutton suggests this would be formed around a society based on fairness and just desserts, one in which the full creativity, talent and potential of individuals would be marshalled. There is a resonance between the above and notions of social and co-production - but here again these ideas come up against the harsh realities and contradictions of capitalism noted by Harvey (2013).

ONL seeks to reconstitute an imaginary of the common good marked by community, localism, solidarity and tradition. Paradoxically there is a resonance with Cameron's broken/big society and his turn towards mutualism. It should be noted the discourses of social recession and the broken society mirror one another. The former emphasise the significance of social structure and relations of power which create conditions in which marginalisation and poverty are generated, whereas the latter mobilises notions of cultural pathology (Finlayson, 2010). However, these discourses can readily fold into one another. Both ONL and Coalition politics are at least nominally concerned with opening-up opportunity and facilitating upward social mobility. It is a moot point whether Coalition education policies would facilitate this aspiration as a result of an increasingly divisive and hierarchical educational system in which inequality is systematically reproduced. In contrast to ONL, New Labour was relatively sanguine about the disparities of income and wealth. For example Charles Clarke, whilst Secretary of State for Education, suggested,

[The] government's mission is not to get rid of elites, whose talents we need in so many areas to improve our lives. Our mission is to do what we can to ensure that people from all walks of life get the chance to join these elites and that elites use their knowledge to benefit others... I see one of my greatest responsibilities to be, to offer every citizen the chance to be part of an elite judged on merit. (Clarke, C., 2002, unnumbered)

This meritocratic theme has been a significant current in Labour party thinking and represents its partiality towards educational models of 'contest' mobility (Turner, 1960). Crosland (Labour secretary of state for education), in the 1950s argued,

The essential thing is that every citizen should have an equal chance - that is his basic democratic right; but provided the start is fair, let there be the maximum scope for individual self-advancement. There would then be nothing improper in either a high continuous status ladder... or even a distinct class stratification, since opportunities for attaining the highest status or the topmost stratum would be genuinely equal. (Crosland, 1956, pp.150-1, cited in Parkin, 1973, p.122)

Whilst New Labour criticised the elitism surrounding the application of unwarranted privilege to members of the traditional middle and upper class (Avis, 2008), it stopped short of a robust critique of the structural relations of class. Neither did it balk at the disparities of income and wealth found in British society, provided these were shaped by meritocratic principles. ONL adopts a rather different stance towards class in its call for a social economy based on reciprocity, a sense of justice in which “no-one takes too much and gives back too little” (Cruddas, 2013b, np). ONL is concerned with the increasing polarisation of wealth and income, and the consequences of this for the social fabric. It seeks to address the “squeezed middle” and calls upon a raft of social democratic arguments such as those of Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) to justify its position. It draws on ‘one nation’ arguments to reconstitute a sense of community. Whilst ONL seeks to form a settlement around ‘one nation’ it does nevertheless draw on contributory notions, which may, in themselves, serve to exacerbate inequality and mirror the division between the rough and respectable working class, or the deserving and undeserving poor. Miliband suggests that,

People’s faith in social security has been shaken when it appears that some people get something for nothing and other people get nothing for something – no reward for the years of contribution they make. We have to tackle this too. Overcoming worklessness, rewarding work and tackling low pay, investing in the future and recognising contribution: these are the Labour ways to reform our social security system....

So the four building blocks of a One Nation social security system are: work, rewarding work, investing for the future not paying for failure, and recognising contribution. (Miliband, 2013a, np)

ONL addresses what Allen and Ainley (2007) refer to as the insecure working/middle class, many of whom work in the public sector, seen in the concern with the ‘squeezed middle’ and the adoption of the living wage (Labour Party, 2013). The aim is to interrupt and reduce the polarities of income and wealth. Herein lies a class politics, that at least rhetorically, is different to New Labour. Yet at the same time it faces similar contradictions which are brought to the fore in ONL’s approach to VET.

Vocational Education and Training

There are significant continuities between the Coalition and ONL's approach to VET. For both parties VET has assumed greater importance and is seen as making a significant contribution to economic and societal wellbeing. It should be noted that in earlier periods both Labour and Conservative administrations have called for the enhancement of VET, its rigour and quality. This can be illustrated by New Labour's development of Centres of Vocational Excellence in Further Education (COVE), which rest alongside ONL's current concern to create Institutes of Technical Education, (Hunt (Shadow Education minister), 2013b). COVEs were to,

develop new, and enhance existing, excellent vocational provision which is focused on meeting the skills needs of employers, nationally, sectorally, regionally and locally. They will seek to give a greater number of individuals from all backgrounds access to the **high quality vocational training** which they **need to succeed in a modern economy**. [my emphasis] (LSC, 2001, p3; and see Avis, 2004)

However, the aspirations of both parties have come up against the tripartism that is a feature of English education and the pre-eminence of A levels as a route to more prestigious universities and occupations. This is notwithstanding the historic unwillingness to radically reform the qualification structure for 16-19 year olds and to embed a system in which the vocational and academic are part of every young person's curricular experience. New Labour in its white paper *14-19 Education and Skills* called for "greater stretch and challenge" (DfES, 2005, p63) and for increased differentiation at A level so that universities would be able to choose between "the highest performing candidates" (DfES, 2005, p63). VET was rather more orientated towards social inclusion and cohesion, and the integration of the potentially disaffected into wider society. Although such tendencies remain in place at the time of writing, they rest alongside a concern to re-balance⁽⁶⁾ the economy and to accord more value to vocational qualifications in order to enhance their standing

in the wider community. This tendency is expressed in the desire to overcome the vocational/academic divide. In this instance both the Coalition and ONL emphasise the need for gold standard VET. Yet A levels are the benchmark qualification against which others are judged and against which VET is seen as lacking. This arises as much from the classed basis of A levels and their route to privilege as it does from their specific curriculum. Despite attempts to raise the standing of VET, A levels remain the gold standard qualification, par excellence. Much of this debate is hardly new, having been a feature of discussions throughout the previous century and even earlier. VET has at times of growing unemployment and economic recession assumed policy importance but this has been a cyclical process being subsequently eclipsed by the dominance of the academic curriculum.

In the following I point to a number of significant similarities between the policies of ONL and the Coalition. Whilst these are marked by differing nuances there are overlapping themes that can be identified, one being the need for a re-balancing and reinvigoration of the 'productive' economy. This has resulted in a call to reform vocational qualifications in order to enhance their standing. Hancock, the Coalition Skills minister stated when announcing technical level qualifications that,

Tech levels will recognise rigorous and responsive technical education. High-quality rigorous vocational education is essential to future prosperity, and the life chances of millions. Because technical education is so important, it is vital the qualifications young people take are stretching, high-quality and support their aspirations. These reforms are unashamedly aspirational and will ensure tech levels help people into apprenticeships and jobs. So for the first time we will ensure that exam boards list the employers or universities which support their courses. Only these stretching, strong courses will count in league tables. (DfE, 2013 np)

This sits alongside a proposal for the development of a technical baccalaureate as an alternative to traditional A levels.

Mr Hancock said, it [the technical baccalaureate] would be rigorous and challenging, finally giving vocational education the high status it deserved – putting it on a par with A level study and recognising

excellence. He added it would give bright young people aspiring to a vocational career a first-class alternative to the more traditional A level route, ensuring they have the technical ability employers want, and giving Britain the skilled workforce it needs to compete in the global race. (DfE, 2013 np)

A similar call has been made by ONL.

[Stephen Twigg, the then Shadow Education minister] argue[s] that vocational education is ripe for a major reform programme, pointing to evidence from the CBI which shows that improving the quality of vocational courses could add as much as a percentage point to economic growth. Labour has established a taskforce of business leaders and education experts to develop new exams and a curriculum for ages 14 to 19. (East Midlands Labour party 2013, np)

The Wolf Report (2011) has been influential and has been drawn on by both ONL and the Coalition in policy discussions. Of particular significance was Wolf's concern that a number of so called vocational qualifications have no purchase in the labour market and are effectively of no value in offering young people a pathway to work. Karen Buck, Labour's Shadow Minister for Young People, warns of the "revolving door of low qualifications' that makes some students worse off than before the course" (Labour Party, 2012, np). In addition she points out,

Whether or not the precise figure quoted by Alison Wolf - that 350,000 young people gain little or no value from the education system - is one everyone agrees on, we can agree that churning in and out of Level 1 and 2 qualifications creates a risk for the student of ending up not in employment, education or training, of finding that the labour market offers little or no return for such low level qualifications. (Labour Party, 2012, np)

One of the ways in which vocational qualifications can acquire increased status is if they have been endorsed or accredited by, or have been developed in partnership with local employers. In these cases the qualifications should have greater purchase in the labour market thus addressing Wolf's concern about the inadequacy of some vocational qualifications, a stance validated by both the Coalition and ONL.

Employers and trade associations will be asked to endorse the best occupational qualifications - to be known as 'tech levels' - so young people know which courses have the best job prospects. (DfE 2013, np)

Miliband stated,

One Nation Labour will create a new technical baccalaureate, to complement A-levels. So a 14-year old knows the qualifications they should be aiming for at 18. It will give employers the control of the money for training for the first time so that young people are trained in the skills they need for the future. (2013b)

In the development of VET both the Coalition and ONL aim to have at its core the needs of local employers. This represents a particular variant of localism that prioritises the demands of the locality and its specific labour market. However, the structure of the local labour market may be such as to restrict the opportunity for the development of an empowering VET. In addition, by prioritising the needs of employers and the labour market a truncated and instrumental form of VET may emerge that is too closely aligned to needs of employers and which may restrict learning opportunities. Importantly, employers are not all of a piece and will have varying skill requirements, ranging from the aesthetic and social skills of 'baristas' to the 'technical' skills of engineers. There are however two presumptions lying behind much of this discussion. Firstly, there is a straight forward logic of up-skilling, rather than that of a polarised skill structure (Hirtt, 2011, p11). Secondly the notion that employers know what their needs are, other than in a rhetorical manner that bemoans the lack of discipline, numeracy and communicative skills of young people (Rikowski, 2001). Drawing upon a similar presumption of up-skilling the ONL and the Coalition call for a modernised apprenticeship system (Hancock, 2013b; The Husbands Review, ud). This in part reflects Wolf's critique of low level vocational qualifications and calls for a re-evaluation and establishment of a gold standard VET system. In this instance level 2 apprenticeships are to be re-named traineeships, with the term apprenticeship restricted to Level 3 (the equivalent of A levels) and above. The duration of apprenticeship is to be extended with Husbands Labour party review arguing for a minimum of two years at Level 3.

These policy developments draw on the rhetoric of ‘parity of esteem’ between the vocational and academic, seeking to overcome the low status attributed to the former. The goal of enhancing the value of vocational qualifications is reflected in several other policy concerns such as the need to reform, develop and enhance apprenticeships as well as the development of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and Studio Schools⁽⁹⁾. These initiatives sit with a far greater emphasis on Maths and English, which it is thought will enhance the rigour of vocational qualifications. Here again there is an accord between the parties. Buck, the then Shadow Minister for Young People, stated, “Under Labour’s plans for a Technical Baccalaureate, courses will be accredited by employers to show they are sufficiently rigorous and all pupils will study English and Maths until age 18” (Labour Party, 2012, np). Hancock (Coalition) in a not dissimilar vein commented, “everyone will carry on learning maths to 18, either to get a GCSE or an advanced core maths qualification. If they didn’t pass English GCSE, they’ll keep learning that, too” (2013a, np). The point is that across the political divide there are common elements that call for the reform of VET and that putatively aim to enhance its standing. It is as if there is a repertoire of strategies that circulate amongst policy makers who take for granted the nature and purpose of VET, construing it as simply offering preparation for work (CAVTL, 2013). Questions concerned with the manner in which VET articulates with the class structure are obscured by the desire to offer parity of esteem. Here the aim is to enhance the standing of the vocational against the academic rather than a serious engagement with the 16-19 curriculum and its fundamental reform. This is a debate that has been a secular feature of discussion in England throughout the last century. This absence feeds into a failure to engage with the way in which the academic/vocational divide articulates with the class structure and plays an important role in the reproduction of inequality – again a secular concern. In addition there are questions about the nature of work in societies such as our own. Here again the focus is upon the rhetoric of up-skilling, the skills gap, competitiveness and economic growth, all of which belie the structure of the labour market. This is a labour market that is rather more characterised by over-qualification and underemployment than by a significant skills gap or the requirement for up-skilling and is one in which ‘rotten jobs’ are an

inherent feature (Keep and James, 2010; Brynin, 2012). Allen and Ainley (2014) point to the findings of the UKCES skills survey (Winterbotham., Vivian., Shury., Davies and Kik., 2014, p8) and state,

In fact, the latest UKCES skills survey report shows only 15% of employers reporting skill deficiencies with two-thirds of these the result of employees taking on new or changing roles. (Allen and Ainley, 2014, p3)

Furthermore the UKCES skill survey found,

Half of UK employers (48 per cent) report skills under-use, and 4.3 million workers (16 per cent of the total UK workforce) are reported as being over-skilled and over-qualified for the jobs that they are currently doing. (Winterbotham., Vivian., Shury., Davies and Kik.,2014, p11)

At best the Coalition and ONL are being over optimistic. The preceding discussion of the labour market raises questions about their interests in extending VET to address the needs of the 'forgotten 50%' (The Husbands Review) as well as their putative concerns with social justice. Hirtt (2013), whilst discussing European policy, questions the presumption of growth in employment (p116) and lodges this within a polarised labour market for skills. That is to say, a labour market in which capital is not all of a piece with varying requirements ranging from trade to generic skills (p127). Furthermore, Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) draw our attention to the collapse of the post Second World War opportunity structure, which promised young people and their families that investment in education would lead to middle class jobs and concomitant income. Echoing the earlier arguments of Marx (1976) and Braverman (1974) concerning the degradation of work, Brown et al (2011) suggest that digital Taylorism will result in the deskilling of formerly skilled knowledge workers. This process rests alongside the increasing polarisation of income between knowledge workers. A small élite thought to possess the skills, creativity and talent that enable transnational companies to out-perform their competitors receive a wage premium, whilst others experience deteriorating incomes. This is the spectre of a high skills low wage nexus that confronts workers in western economies. Perhaps more importantly digital Taylorism coexists with a

labour market in which there has been a hollowing out of 'middling' jobs (Roberts, 2013), increased income polarisation and the growth of precariousness (CEDEFOP (2012). Indeed, Allen and Ainley (2014) go so far as to describe the class structure as pear shaped, with a growth in insecure working/middle class jobs. Whilst the parties are in favour of an industrial strategy and call for the re-balancing of the economy, in effect its re-industrialisation, the extent to which this will generate significant growth in employment is questionable. Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2012) are not alone in problematising the potential growth in employment, with Bastani (2012) referring to jobless re-industrialisation. This then returns to the earlier discussion of responsible capitalism. The need for rebalancing arises as a result of the economy being distorted as a result of financialisation and the uneven dichotomy between the 'real' productive economy and finance. There is an argument that suggests that worker resistance to Fordism allied with the crisis of profitability facing capital paved the way for post-Fordism and concomitantly the increased significance attached to finance (Berardi, 2009). Relatedly the split between the 'real' economy and finance is overblown, with some writers suggesting that the dichotomy is not only unsustainable but that there is also something qualitatively new about the way in which capital seeks to extract surplus value (Marazzi, 2011). This arises not only through the exploitation of 'free' labour (Terranova, 2000) but can also be seen in financialisation whereby,

The financialization of the economy has been a process of recovering capital's profitability after the period of profit margin decreases, an apparatus to enhance capital's profitability *outside* immediately productive processes. (Marazzi, 2011, p31)

Importantly processes of financialisation are not restricted to the city but are also engaged in by transnational corporations who are able to secure larger profits by investing in finance rather than through investment in 'production', with Marazzi (2011, p27) citing General Motors as an example. The point is that such practices belie a clear cut distinction between responsible and irresponsible capital as well as that between the 'real' productive economy and finance.

Whilst much of the preceding discussion has sought to illustrate the continuities that lie between ONL and the Coalitions positions on VET, it

is nevertheless important to acknowledge their differences as these may offer varying affordances for resistance and the development of transformative practices. The Conservative led Coalition has a stronger commitment to the market and deregulation than ONL who, whilst acknowledging the value of competition also seek to encourage cross-institutional co-operation and call for the involvement of trade unions in the development of VET. Both parties emphasise the need for an industrial strategy with ONL tending to place a greater emphasis on this and its relationship to the labour market. Both are concerned with the continuous professional development (CPD) of VET teachers but adhere to different models with ONL seeking to reinstate the requirement for VET teachers to have a teaching qualification. Yet despite these differences there is a common interest in competitiveness and in ensuring that VET is responsive to the needs of local employers. It is within this common context that both parties interest in learner empowerment and social justice resides. Localised empowerment arises through the interaction between the market and user communities but is constrained by cuts in social spending and deficit reduction. The point is that devolving power to the locality becomes in effect one of managing cuts and deficit reduction – the making of tough choices. The effect is that responsibility and therefore blame is shifted from the centre to the locality.

Towards a conclusion

It is salutary to recall Hall's description of the Labour Party, "as the second party of capital" (Hall and Massey, 2010:59). One Nation Labour could be seen as attempting to refashion social democracy and the state to fit austere times. As with its predecessor New Labour, it is attempting to validate a 'softer' form of capitalism in order to overcome the failings of what Hay (2013) refers to as Anglo-liberal capitalism. For ONL there is a concern to manage expectations, to think smart and to devolve power whereby greater responsibility, and by default blame, can be attributed to the community. Its call for a social economy is set within a terrain in which this is thought to facilitate a more effective and potentially successful form of capitalism. However, ONL's model is inevitably constrained by this capitalist orientation which in turn is limited by the wider global socio-economic context in which it operates. It is a moot

point as to whether ONL is going beyond neoliberalism or merely refashioning it with a social democratic veneer suited to austere times. The preceding discussion raises questions about the ability of the English economy to generate high skilled and waged employment, to ensure moves towards full employment, to reinstate the promise of raising living standards and to move beyond a polarised labour market characterised by over-qualification and underemployment. All of this is deeply problematic within the context of an apparently social democratic politics that remains wedded to capitalism and is tied to a conceptualisation of the good life that is linked to 'productivism', that is to say, the notion that it is necessary to engage in waged labour in order to live a fulfilled life. The paradox is that 'leftist' analyses often celebrate work as an arena in which we can express our 'species being' and which is pivotal to individual and societal wellbeing. Capitalism is seen as distorting this relationship leading to alienation and the appropriation of surplus value and in this way undermines the 'true' and authentic nature of labour.

There is no conceivable material or technological excuse for unemployment, when there is abundant work which could and should be done, in nurturing, developing and expressing human capabilities. (Rustin, 2013, no page number)

The celebration of labour is reflected in Rustin's quote and whilst we could engage in a lengthy discussion about the nature of work his argument is rooted in productivism. It could be argued that ONL's model of the social economy is unlikely to lead to work that facilitates "nurturing, developing and expressing human capabilities" which is available to all. Davies (2006) in *Planet of Slums*, discusses surplus labour, that is to say, that which lies outside the purview of capitalist relations. The significance of such arguments is that they raise questions about the ability of capitalism to generate meaningful work that transcends the tendency towards deskilling and digital Taylorism. The difficulty with arguments that align with ONL's position of neoliberalism as an irresponsible form of capitalism when set against social democratic variants as manifest in the social economy, is that this is viewed as qualitatively different. However, as noted earlier capitalism is capitalism with its attendant contradictions and it is disingenuous to

suggest otherwise, after all the ‘real’ productive economy and finance are inextricably entwined. Lest the preceding be considered too bleak, the rhetoric of ONL does open-up spaces for radical intervention.

Perhaps we should engage in a ‘revolutionary reformism’ whereby we seek to push the policies of One Nation Labour as far as we can in progressive directions which are committed to the tenets of social justice and anti-capitalism. However, it is as well to note that such a politics comes up against the contradictions of capitalism as well as those that surround what Allen and Ainley (2012) refers to as the market state.

Notes

1. A brief, earlier version of this paper was published in *Post Sixteen Educator* (Avis 2014).
2. The Labour Party would see itself as a British/UK party. However, the four home nations that constitute the UK have devolved responsibility for education, skills and vocational education and training.
3. In May 2010 following the general election a Coalition government was formed between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. David Cameron (Conservative) became the prime minister with Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat) his deputy.
4. “The membership of each of Labour’s policy commissions is drawn from our National Policy Forum, the Shadow Cabinet and our National Executive Committee, and reflects all parts of our movement, including grassroots Labour Party members, representatives of affiliates such as trade unions, and elected politicians”. (Policy commissions, <http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/agenda-2015/policy-commissions> accessed 2 April 2014)
5. “Blue Labour is the Labour Party pressure group that aims to put relationships and responsibility at the heart of British politics. Launched in 2010 by academic and Labour peer Maurice Glasman, the organisation is dedicated to reclaiming distinctive traditions of reciprocity and mutuality in the labour movement. It combines respect for family, faith and work with a commitment to the common good: sustainable politics that helps people lead meaningful lives”. (<http://www.bluelabour.org/who-we-are/> accessed 12 April 2014)
6. Stewart Wood, Labour life peer who sits in the House of Lords and has served as an adviser to Gordon Brown a former labour prime minister and to Ed Miliband.
7. Nick Clegg the deputy prime minister, contrary to Coalition policy, has proposed that Free Schools should follow the national curriculum and

employ teaching staff who are either qualified or are in the process of becoming so (BBC News, 2013).

8. Although re-balancing the economy is frequently referred to by politicians and in this paper is used to point to the debate surrounding the shift from financial services to manufacturing, it is frequently used rhetorically. It can point in any number of directions, for example, regional disparities, the dependence on public spending, the sectoral composition of private economic activity, etc., (Froud, Johal, Law, Leaver, and Williams, 2011).

9. “University Technical Colleges (UTCs) are technical academies for 14- to 19 year-olds. They have university and employer sponsors and combine practical and academic studies. UTCs specialise in subjects that need modern, technical, industry-standard equipment – such as engineering and construction – which are taught alongside business skills and the use of ICT.

Studio Schools are innovative schools for 14- to 19-year-olds, backed by local businesses and employers. They often have a specialism, but focus on equipping young people with a wide range of employability skills and a core of academic qualifications, delivered in a practical and project-based way” (DfE, undated).

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