The long and winding road: Labour governments, poverty and social justice from 1945 to the present day


In ‘Towards a red and pleasant land’, Robert Page describes the difficulties that the first Attlee government experienced in tackling poverty. Their decision to opt for a social insurance scheme based on affordable, flat-rate contributions rather than a more egalitarian tax-funded scheme proved problematic. Over time an increasing number of beneficiaries were forced to rely on means-tested National Assistance payments to avoid poverty. The strong link between Labour’s anti-poverty measures and their broader commitment to the creation of a more socially just society is also discussed. While giving full credit to the Attlee governments’ achievements in areas such as healthcare and housing, Page draws out the longer-term implications of their failure to provide a route map for the establishment of a socialist commonwealth.

Turning to the 1964–70 Labour government, Jim Tomlinson reflects on the difficulties that the Wilson administrations encountered in an era of economic turbulence and the ‘rediscovery’ of poverty, which raised ‘the question of what minimum standard of living was acceptable’ (page 137) in an increasingly affluent society. Tomlinson demonstrates how the government’s acceptance of the ‘revisionist’ doctrine – that advances in social policy were dependent on economic growth – made it difficult to ensure the delivery of manifesto commitments. He also refers to the administrative complexities involved in introducing egalitarian forms of social security. Tomlinson concludes that the Wilson governments did achieve modest reductions in poverty and inequality despite adverse demographic and labour market trends and concern about the increasing tax burden.

David Piachaud provides a refreshing corrective to the generally negative assessments of the 1974–79 Labour governments. Stressing that both Wilson and Callaghan had ‘decent instincts and a real concern for ordinary people’s lives’ (page 153), Piachaud demonstrates how such concerns were translated into practical policy making. Despite major economic difficulties, which ‘necessitated’ a request for financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund in 1976, Piachaud draws attention to the government’s success in extending the range of benefits while also maintaining its commitment to universalism and a redistributive tax system, securing a modest reduction in poverty and enhancing social rights. While acknowledging that there were failings in the Wilson and Callaghan eras, not least in addressing inequalities in wealth, Piachaud concludes that both governments of the period ‘showed more effective concern for social justice than any government since then’.
In the final article, Stephen Driver examines New Labour’s approach to poverty and social justice. He acknowledges that many traditional Labour supporters have questioned whether New Labour’s ready embrace of the market and its emphasis on the need to work with the grain of the global economy has resulted in, at best, a lukewarm commitment to the abolition of poverty and the pursuit of social justice. In particular, New Labour’s decision to tighten the eligibility criteria for many benefits in order to encourage more claimants to ‘work’ their way out of poverty has proved controversial.

Driver provides a balanced assessment of New Labour’s ‘work first’ approach to poverty, noting that while the government ‘has had considerable success with those who can work and who have been able to find employment in a buoyant labour market, it has been far less successful with those who, for whatever reason, remain jobless’ (page 164). In his concluding section, Driver makes a spirited defence of New Labour’s decision to make compromises ‘between equality and freedom and the state and the market’. It remains to be seen, however, whether New Labour has succeeded in developing a strategic and popular realignment of social democracy or a ‘pragmatic’ accommodation with the tenets of neoliberalism (Shaw, 2007).

Reference