Owen Jones: holder of the Blairite flame?

Reading Owen Jones piece in yesterday's Guardian I had to check again whether it had really been written by him. The article castigates the Blairites in the Labour Party over their abstention on the welfare bill parliamentary vote. He complains that they failed to defend New Labour's 'legacy'. The sub-heading of the piece reads:

“The Blairites and Brownites are in perverse denial of their good record on poverty and the public services.”

Astonishingly Owen says that “It's people like me who are the holders of the Blairite flame...”. The “greatest defenders of this (New Labour)legacy are the left”.

What exactly is this legacy? Let's start with their 'good record' on the public sector. The New Labour government opened up the NHS to the private sector, introducing a 'competitive market' in which the 'competition' was rigged in favour of private companies which were paid more money for each procedure than NHS organisations were, fractured the service by introducing Foundation Trusts, introduced PFI for the building of new hospitals at extortionate prices, as a result of which the finances of Trusts are now stretched by these bloated debts. New Labour opened the way to the Tories to further open NHS work to the private vultures. New Labour is responsible for the current situation in which the national service has been dismantled.

In relation to housing the problem was not just as Owen mentions that the New Labour government did not build enough 'affordable homes'. It maintained Thatcher's policy of 'right to buy' and it stepped up the use of 'transfer' ballots in an attempt to wipe out Council housing. They set a target of 200,000 transfers a year. They were prepared to write off housing debt just so long as tenants voted 'the right' way, in favour of transfer. New Labour worshipped home ownership and participated in the stigmatisation of tenants. Brown wanted to remove the Council housing 'debt' from the national balance sheet by getting rid of Council housing.

Were the 48 MP's who voted against the Tories welfare bill “defending New Labour's legacy” because they were opposing cuts to tax credits. I hardly think so. They were opposing the loss of tax credits which would mean millions of people be worse off; 13 million families according to the IFS, 3 million of them £1,000 or more a year.

Fundamentally, the reason that Labour lost the 2015 election was because they failed to break with the politics of New Labour. Miliband defended the market version of 'clause 4'. Indeed his whole politics was premised on the basis of 'market competition'. He wanted the markets produced by the privatised public utilities to 'work' rather than abandoning them. He could not even take the step of bringing back the train companies into public ownership at nil cost when the franchises ran out.

‘One Nation Labour’¹, praising a supporter of the monarchy and the empire, Disraeli, was no different to Blair's 'one nation party'. The rich and the poor, the financier and the shop

¹ See http://martinwicks.wordpress.com/2012/10/09/one-nation-labour-new-labour-lite-with-a-touch-of-disraeli/#more-431
worker, were apparently tied together by a spurious 'national interest'.

Yet all that Owen can say, in mealy mouthed fashion is that “certainly the left had criticisms at the time”. Yes, they certainly did, but not criticisms of detail. New labour took the party now a neo-liberal dead-end.

New Labour did introduce some progressive social policies, devolution, financial support for child care which enabled women to get back into work. The minimum wage was a good thing but set far too low and tax credits were, of course, a subsidy for low wage employers. New Labour cannot be understood by a tick list of pros and cons. Whatever positive things it did were overshadowed by its fundamentally neo-liberal politics which borrowed much from Thatcher. It worshipped the merits of 'partnership' between trades unions and employers, subordinating the interests of the working class to the interests of big business.

The current success of the Corbyn campaign gives the lie to these ludicrous assertions by Owen. Corbyn was one of the few Labour MP's who didn't buy into the politics of New Labour. What is required is a fundamental break from 'Blairism'. It isn't a 'tragedy' that these people aren't supporting their 'achievements'. They swallowed the Thatcherite poison. Let them choke to death on it. Owen is painting the ugly beast with pretty features. New Labour had no “grand achievements” Owen. Surely anybody on ‘the left’ should be seeking not to keep the Blairite flame alive, but to snuff it out.

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