



New Labour, New Language?

Norman Fairclough

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NEW LABOUR, NEW LANGUAGE?

To those of us who find ourselves carried along helplessly in Tony Blair's rhetorical stream of consciousness, Norman Fairclough offers a life-saving branch to which we can cling, while we work out where we are and where we are being swept.
(Simon Hoggart)

It's time to 'bin the spin!' Is New Labour's 'new politics for a new Britain' just rhetoric, just empty words?

This is a book about the politics of New Labour that focuses on language. Norman Fairclough gets behind the rhetoric to uncover the real meaning. He examines a wide range of political speeches and texts, from Tony Blair's speech following the death of Diana to the 1997 Labour Party Manifesto and Bill Clinton's book *Between Hope and History*.

New Labour, New Language? blows open the whole debate on the nature of the political discourse of New Labour and the 'Third Way'. Written in a clear, non-technical style and including a glossary, *New Labour, New Language?* will appeal to anyone interested in language or politics.

Norman Fairclough is Professor of Language in Social Life at Lancaster University and the author of many books, including *Language and Power* (1989).

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PREFACE

Bin the spin!

Is New Labour's 'new politics' for a 'new Britain' just rhetoric, just empty words? Does the Government's notorious taste for 'media spin' mean that presentation becomes more important than policy, rhetoric more important than substance? This is a book about the politics of New Labour which focuses on language. It's a critique of the language of New Labour.

Why focus on language? Because language is crucial in the politics of New Labour. Language has always been important in politics, but the way New Labour does politics makes it more so. Why for instance did the Labour Party change its name to 'New Labour'? According to one of its key advisers, Blair 'knew that only by contrasting "new" Labour with "old" Labour explicitly would the electorate believe that Labour had changed and could be trusted'.¹ In other words, changing the name wasn't just reflecting a shift in political ideology, it was manipulating language to control public perception.

The public relations industry (to which Gould belongs) is at the heart of New Labour, which calculatively manipulates language. The phenomenon is not new, but the scale and intensity certainly are. Despite a rhetorical commitment to decentralising government, New Labour firmly manages the political and governmental process from the centre (Blair is widely perceived as a 'control freak'). Part of this is governing by 'media spin', constantly monitoring and manipulating how issues are presented in the media. This is largely a matter of making sure the right language is used – for instance, making sure that the approved expression 'public-private partnership' is used rather than the dreaded 'Tory' term 'privatisation'; and avoiding the even more dreaded 's'-word 'socialism'). Managerial government is partly managing language, and this also includes managing the language of the leader, Tony

Blair – not only the content of what he says, but the values which are conveyed through his style of saying things: decency, common sense, ‘middle England’, compassion, toughness, and so forth. For instance, Blair is very good at showing care and compassion in the way he talks and in his ‘body language’, and New Labour’s impression managers have built upon this gift. New Labour understands that it is not enough to talk about ‘values’ (which it often does), it also needs a language that conveys the values for which it claims to stand.

What about policy? New Labour is committed to a ‘Third Way’, which they claim transcends the ‘old’ division between left and right. There is an immediate question about rhetoric and substance: the ‘Third way’ is much talked about, but it is by no means clear that it is a distinctive political position. Some would say it is Thatcherism with a few frills.

New Labour is totally committed to the neo-liberal global economy, and actively supports international initiatives to enhance the tendency towards ‘globalisation’, e.g. extending free trade. There are winners and losers in globalisation. It is the winners who are eager to extend it, and New Labour basically backs the winners (despite its claim to ‘tackle’ the ‘social exclusion’ of the losers). One important resource in extending globalisation is controlling the language in which it is represented. For instance, in the political language of New Labour, ‘globalisation’ and ‘the new global economy’ are represented as accomplished facts rather than partial and uneven tendencies, and ‘change’ is represented as an inevitable movement in the direction of globalisation. The language of New Labour tells us ‘there is no alternative’ – neo-liberalism is something with which we have to live. It also represents its commitment to international neo-liberal policies, such as the reduction of welfare spending, in ways that rhetorically dress up what is going on – for instance by using what Stuart Hall has called the ‘weasel word’ – ‘reform’.²

The language of the ‘Third Way’ is a rhetoric of reconciliation – ‘economic dynamism as well as social justice’, ‘enterprise as well as fairness’. The ‘old’ politics misguidedly thought you had to choose between these, but you don’t! The language of New Labour is full of such expressions with the sense of ‘not only this but also that’. But saying that we can have both this and that, both ‘economic dynamism’ and ‘social justice’, tells us nothing about the relationship between them. Do energies and resources go equally to achieving ‘economic dynamism’ and ‘social justice’? Don’t we need to limit

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‘economic dynamism’ if we want ‘social justice’? How can we do this except through using the power of the state to control the economy? Doesn’t New Labour’s absolute rejection of state ‘interference’ in the economy mean that the language of the ‘Third Way’ is just that – mere words, empty rhetoric?

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Norman Fairclough

NEW LABOUR, NEW LANGUAGE?

An introduction

At the end of 1998, the British 'New Labour' Government had something of a crisis: two Cabinet ministers resigned in the face of accusations of financial impropriety. The worst blow was the loss of Peter Mandelson, the Minister for Trade and Industry, one of the chief architects of New Labour and of its electoral victory, and one of the closest allies of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Mandelson's departure led to intense speculation over a shift in direction on the part of the Government; in one formulation at the time: a move towards rather less of the 'new' and more of the 'Labour'. The Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was widely interpreted as advocating such a shift. This was the interpretation which was for instance put on an interview he gave to the *Independent*,¹ in which he said 'we need to get away from rhetoric and back on to the substance of government'. That statement apparently constituted the basis for the *Independent's* headline: 'Prescott bins the spin for real policies'. 'The spin' is an allusion to New Labour's 'spin-doctors', the people responsible for the media presentation of the Government and for putting a media 'spin' (or angle) on its policies and activities. Media communications are more carefully handled and more centrally controlled by the New Labour Government than any previous British government, and the Government has been accused by its critics of governing by media spin. Mandelson himself had overall responsibility for media communications as the Minister without Portfolio before he was shifted to the Department of Trade and Industry. He was closely associated with New Labour's reputation for being preoccupied with spin, and credited with being the spin-doctor par excellence.

John Prescott was interviewed on the BBC Radio 4 'Today' programme a few days after the interview in the *Independent*.² He

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was at pains on that occasion to deny that there were any major divisions over policy or strategy within the Government. Indeed he returned to the contrast between ‘rhetoric’ and ‘substance’, but used it to set the Government against the press – given the manifesto undertakings it has implemented, the Government ‘is a government of substance, of traditional values in a modern setting’, it is the press that ‘are not really interested in that substance’, that go in for ‘rhetoric’. But ‘rhetoric’ seems quite an appropriate way of describing what Prescott is doing here: having taken the opportunity of Mandelson’s resignation (as well as Blair’s absence abroad on holiday) to publicly air divisions within the Government and to take a position, he neatly relocates the ‘rhetoric versus substance’ issue as a criticism not of the Government but of the press. If politicians are to successfully pursue internal divisions in public in contemporary mediated politics, they need the sort of skills Prescott is manifesting in this case: being able to venture a criticism in a sufficiently ambivalent way that one can draw back from it if challenged without bringing into question the unity of the Government or Party or one’s own loyalty.

This is how the interviewer, Jim Naughtie, responded to Prescott:

You’ve made your point very clearly. The point though is that the way that people in government talk about these things is important, you’d acknowledge that. Indeed it was Mr Mandelson’s credo that the way you talked about things, the way you used language was very important, because it sent out messages. And you don’t need to be told that a lot of Labour MPs – when they saw what you were saying, the language you were using, ‘traditional values’ albeit ‘in a modern setting’ – were saying: ‘Look, here at last is a little more of the stuff we want to hear. He doesn’t talk about “The Project” doesn’t talk about “New Labour”, he talks about “Labour”.’

And Prescott’s answer was:

Yes but then that is presented as a kind of great division. It’s not a division because I’m pointing out to you the things that every one of us support the traditional values in a modern setting, what I’m saying is perhaps we should emphasize it a great deal more.

Naughtie is combining, perhaps confusing, two issues. One is the issue of what ‘messages’ politicians convey to one another through shifts of language – one way of seeing politics is as an ongoing struggle to achieve dominance of one political position over others which is partly enacted as a struggle for the dominance of political language, a struggle for instance to win acceptance for formulations like ‘traditional values in a modern setting’ rather than the ‘Third Way’, or ‘Labour’ rather than ‘New Labour’. Naughtie is suggesting that this is what Prescott was doing in the interview, but Prescott rejects the implication of a division within New Labour: the question is only how much ‘emphasis’ is given to parts of what he implies is a shared language. Again, Prescott seems to be rhetorically covering over internal differences.

The second issue is the perception very much associated with Peter Mandelson that the language which politicians use ‘sends messages’ to the public, from which it has been seen to follow that the language has to be tightly monitored to make sure that it sends the ‘right’ message, or in favoured New Labour parlance is ‘on message’. In fact one question that Naughtie asks Prescott is whether on this occasion he abided by Government policy that all ministerial media statements should be ‘checked’ by the Prime Minister’s press office (headed by another formidable spin-doctor, Alistair Campbell). Prescott’s rather sour reply was that he had ‘talked to people’ about what he ‘was going to say’ – he seems to avoid using the word ‘check’, which would imply the Deputy Prime Minister (Prescott) being subject to the judgement of an unelected official.

Language, politics, and government

Language has always been important in politics and in government (I don’t see politics and government as the same thing – I shall draw a distinction between them below). Political differences have always been constituted as differences in language, political struggles have always been partly struggles over the dominant language, and both the theory and practice of political rhetoric go back to ancient times. Language has therefore always been a relevant consideration in political analysis. But language has become significantly more important over the past few decades because of social changes which have transformed politics and government. An important part of these changes is a new relationship between politics, government and mass media – a new synthesis which means that many significant political events are now in fact media events (for instance, a TV

interview with the Prime Minister can itself be a major political event). There has been what one might call a ‘mediatisation’ of politics and government. The particular genius of Peter Mandelson has perhaps been in seeing that these changes may have more radical implications for the nature of politics and government than has so far been realised. Mandelson has not been alone in seeing this: to a degree what he has done is bring to British politics developments which have been going on elsewhere, particularly in the USA. But there is also a process of change which is being referred to in the USA, Britain and internationally as the ‘reinvention of government’,³ which entails a greater focusing of language. I shall discuss this below.

One consequence of the ‘mediatisation’ of politics and government is the transformation of political leaders into media personalities. This probably started in Britain with Harold Macmillan in the 1950s. Tony Blair’s immensely successful populist leadership style is comparable in certain respects with Margaret Thatcher’s, though very different in other respects. The communicative style of leaders is now recognised as a crucial factor in political success or failure, and Labour is acutely aware of this because their recent history has included failures, notably Michael Foot but also to some extent Neil Kinnock. Communicative style is a matter of language in the broadest sense – certainly verbal language (words), but also all other aspects of the complex bodily performance that constitutes political style (gestures, facial expressions, how people hold themselves and move, dress and hairstyle, and so forth). A successful leader’s communicative style is not simply what makes him or her attractive to voters in a general way, it conveys certain values which can powerfully enhance the political ‘message’ (see further below).

New Labour claims to be a ‘new politics’. According to Tony Blair, ‘ideas need labels if they are to become popular and widely understood. The “Third Way” is to my mind the best label for the new politics which the progressive centre-left is forging in Britain and beyond’.⁴ Notice two things about this: first, the ‘Third Way’ is being ‘forged’; second, ‘forging’ it is linked to making it ‘popular and widely understood’. The ‘Third Way’ does not come ready-formed, nor is it forged once-and-for-all. On the contrary, New Labour politicians are constantly forming and formulating it, in speeches, newspaper articles, books and pamphlets, official documents, etc. They are constantly working on making coherent connections between the policies and ideas – ‘enterprise’, ‘flexibility’, ‘welfare-to-work’,

‘social exclusion/inclusion’, ‘participation’, ‘fairness’, and so forth. The ‘Third Way’ is constantly being talked into being, new language is constantly being found to bring these elements together into a coherent whole. This is a process that cannot be completed – circumstances keep changing, and differences within New Labour are worked through in different formulations, differences of language. And crucially this is going on in public – there is no clear line between finding policies that work and finding policies that win consent. As Franklin puts it, ‘New Labour’ is perhaps the first government genuinely committed to the view that presentation is part of the process of policy formation’.⁵ Analysing the shifting language of the ‘Third Way’ is an essential part of getting to grips with the ‘new politics’ of New Labour.

At the same time, New Labour is involved in a ‘reinvention of government’ which in itself entails a greater salience for language. In part, this is a matter of a new form of control from the centre based upon business corporation models, including promotional means for managing consent. This involves ‘government by media spin’, but also what Blair has referred to as ‘experiments in democracy’ through for instance ‘focus groups’ and ‘citizens’ juries’, which allow the Government to develop its policy in a way that incorporates public opinion from the start. But the centralised management of political communication in the New Labour Government seems to be at odds with another aspect of the ‘reinvention of government’ – the Government’s commitment to ‘devolving power and making government more open and responsive’.⁶ This includes a certain dispersal of government, which is indicated by the concept of ‘participation’ – a great many task forces, reviews and advisory groups have been set up with memberships that bring together the Government, business, voluntary organisations and other sections of society. Many groups and people who have hitherto not been involved in government are being drawn in, and it is in that sense that government is becoming more dispersed.⁷ However, this does not mean that the centre has given up control – it is a dispersal, but not a fragmentation. In so far as ‘partnership’ becomes a reality rather than just a rhetoric (see below), it entails a new form of control that crucially involves language – shaping the culture, discourse and language of the dispersed agents of government rather than directly controlling what they do.

This book is about the language and rhetoric of New Labour. It is not just a book about language for people who are interested in language. It is also a book about politics and government for people

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who are interested in politics and government. It is a book about politics and government that approaches them through language, as language; or, to use a term that has come into fashion recently, as ‘discourse’. I think it is appropriate to write a book about New Labour which centres upon language for the reasons I have begun to indicate above – to sum them up, because (as New Labour politicians are aware) language is becoming an increasingly prominent element of the practices of politics and government. This does not mean that it was not important before – its inherent importance has become clearer as its prominence has increased. I think the main point of writing such a book is that a focus on the language of New Labour can enhance our understanding, as well as analysis, of the politics of New Labour.

New Labour is widely seen as a major break in British politics and government, and as such it has aroused a great deal of controversy (to which I have already begun to allude). A focus on language can contribute to debate on controversial issues. Let me sum up three:

- What is the ‘Third Way’? Is it really any more than a veiled form of Thatcherism or neo-liberalism?
- How does New Labour’s promise of more open government square with the centralised and tightly managed way in which it actually governs?
- Tony Blair has developed a very successful style, but is there any political substance beneath it?

Analysing political language

We can identify three different aspects of political language which I have referred to in the discussion above: the communicative style of political leaders, the political discourse associated with a particular party or group (in the case of New Labour, the political discourse of the ‘Third Way’), and the way language is used in the process of governing (or ‘governance’). These are the three main concerns in this book, so I shall say a little more about each of them now.

Blair’s rhetorical style

Tony Blair’s style has been immensely successful. Perhaps the clearest example before the NATO war against Yugoslavia (discussed in chapter 4 and chapter 6) was his widely acclaimed success in ‘capturing the popular mood’ after Princess Diana’s death in the

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autumn of 1997.⁸ Here is the beginning of the short statement he made on that occasion:

I feel like everyone else in the country today – utterly devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana’s family – in particular her two sons, two boys – our hearts go out to them. We are today a nation, in Britain, in a state of shock, in mourning, in grief that is so deeply painful for us.

Why were these words so effective in ‘striking a chord’ with many people?⁹ One important point is that it was not just his words but his overall bodily performance, the way he looked and acted, as well as what he said. But the language was an important factor. Notice in particular that it is a mixed language. There are two threads running through it. Let me ‘extract’ one of them:

Our thoughts and prayers are with Princess Diana’s family, in particular her two sons, our hearts go out to them. We are today a nation in mourning.

This is the conventional sort of language that leaders use to speak on behalf of the nation on such occasions. Blair uses the first person plural (‘we’), and predictable, pre-constructed expressions (clichés) – ‘thoughts and prayers’, ‘our hearts go out to them’, ‘a nation in mourning’ (once you hear ‘our hearts’ for instance on this sort of occasion, you can predict ‘go out’). But threaded into this conventional public language is a more personal language (Blair begins speaking for himself, in the first person singular, and about his own feelings) and a more vernacular language. It is as if Blair (with his advisers – the speech has been attributed to Alistair Campbell) had started with the official form of words, then personalised and informalised it. He uses a vernacular language of affect as well as a public one – ‘utterly devastated’, ‘in a state of shock’. Notice also the way he rewords ‘her two sons’ as ‘two boys’, which again is a shift between a more formal way of referring to them in terms of their relationship to Diana and a more intimate, family way. Blair says he feels ‘like everyone else’ – he is not only speaking formally for ‘the nation’, he is also speaking informally for ordinary people; and part of the power of his style is his ability to combine formality and informality, ceremony and feeling, publicness and privateness.

A crucial part of the success and apparent continuing popularity of Blair’s style is his capacity to, as it were, ‘anchor’ the public politician

in the ‘normal person’ – the necessary posturing and evasions of politics are it seems at least partially redeemed by Blair’s capacity to reassert constantly his normal, decent, likeable personality. In his speeches and interviews there is always a mix between the vernacular language of the normal person and the public language of politics. The sort of ‘normal person’ that comes across is very much ‘middleclass’ and ‘middle-England’ in values, outlook and style. Blair’s communicative style embodies the ‘new politics’ of the ‘Third Way’ in this respect, as also in the way he has learnt how to be ‘tough’ and how to assert moral authority in the way he speaks.

But Blair’s leadership personality and style are not pre-given, they are carefully constructed. For instance, according to Gould,¹⁰ New Labour learnt the political advantage it could gain from being ‘tough’ and talking about being ‘tough’ (including using the word so often) from research on focus groups – Blair’s ‘toughness’ has been selfconsciously built into his communicative style as a matter of policy and strategy. Blair’s apparent and claimed preference for acting on the basis of his political ‘instincts’ is at odds with the careful calculation of effects on ‘public opinion’ which goes into every move that he and New Labour make.¹¹ Blair is, according to his biographer Rentoul, an accomplished showman, an actor. Of course, the circumstances of contemporary politics are not of his making – all politicians have to act, to pretend, or to put it more harshly (though not unfairly) to ‘live a lie’. But individual leaders can respond to those circumstances in various ways – by trying to be more accomplished at pretending than others, or by doing what they can to change the circumstances. Perhaps the charitable view of Blair is that it is not yet clear which he will do, but the fear must be that his is a particularly accomplished show. Certainly, there is some evidence that the claims, which his communicative style implicitly makes, about the way he relates to others are at odds with the way he actually relates to them – stories about Blair as a ‘power freak’ in the managing of the Government (including the Cabinet), the parliamentary Labour Party, and the Labour Party overall, are at odds with the polite, cooperative, open and relaxed personality conveyed in his communicative style. In this sense, leadership styles can ‘lie’.

Tony Blair may stand for New Labour in the popular imagination, but New Labour is in fact a rather disparate alliance of different political positions associated with different communicative styles (that of his deputy, John Prescott, for example). Although the emphasis in this book will be on Blair, it is important not to lose sight of these differences. Another important issue to keep in focus is how