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New Labour and the politics of masculinity

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Abstract

The New Labour government has arguably broken new ground by making 'masculinity policy'. Whereas the policy process is always inevitably gendered, with implications for men as well as women, it is only in the last few years that a government has made quite such explicit references to men in some areas of policy. The most high profile initiatives have been in relation to fathering and to the education of boys. In this paper we make out a case that New Labour proceeds with policy optimism about men in the home and pessimism about men outside the home. In contrast, there has been policy pessimism about women in the home and optimism about women outside the home. Where New Labour is optimistic, it tends to produce policies that are encouraging and facilitative, and where New Labour is pessimistic, it can produce policies that are authoritarian.

The politics of New Labour have been analysed from various perspectives, including discourses of exclusion and inclusion (Levitas, 1998), the language of 'spin' (Fairclough, 2000) and the ideology of social policy (Powell, 1999). This paper aims to analyse New Labour policies from a gender perspective, and specifically to draw attention to a new development – the making of policy on masculinity. Lister (2000) has provided an overview of what a gender analysis has brought to social policy. She lists six questions that are prompted by a gendered analysis of social policy. This paper ranges across all six, in raising some initial observations about New Labour and masculinity. Gender analyses of social policy have, until recently, focused on the effects of policy on women, but we are beginning to see reflection on men in social policy, most notably the collection from Popay *et al* (1998). In that collection Hearn (1998) writes that masculinity is now 'just about' on the policy agenda. We argue in this paper that it is now firmly on the policy agenda. For the first time, a government is consciously addressing, in relation to specific social problems, the issue of how society deals with men, what it expects of men and how men should behave. This is not to suggest that particular strands in policy-making did not previously identify men as a specific target. Criminal justice discourse, for example, has long concentrated upon the 'problem' of boys. The tone may change, but a chain of gender-centred concern does link Baden-Powell's plans for the Hooligan (see Pearson 1983), and the list which Macdonald (1995) provides of the bogeymen of the Major era – 'squatter, the Raver, the New Age traveller, the dole fiddler, the inhabitants of the 'job culture', the lager lout....the bail bandit and the persistent young offender'.

The difference between these previous concerns and the approach of New Labour is the pervasive way in which gender considerations, and a concern with masculinity in particular, can be found across a far wider social policy canvass. Several important questions are raised by this new interest in

policy for/about men: what does this trend signify? why now? what has been the impact of policies? how do government rhetoric and policy initiatives fit into what Messner (1997) calls the 'terrain of the politics of masculinities'?

The Home Office has led the more general policy development in relation to men. In 1998 a Ministerial Seminar on 'Boys, young men and fathers' took place, that mapped out some key areas of concern (Home Office, 1998a). There were sessions during this on bringing up boys, young men in public space, fatherhood, preventing offending in young men, street homelessness, and the mental health of boys and young men. Across government, we have seen the social construction of masculinity consciously raised in relation to several public policy issues, including the under-achievement of boys in schools, fatherhood, health, youth crime and suicide. There is varying emphasis on masculinity, however, between government departments and between parts of the United Kingdom, as discussed in a later section of this article. This paper has two main aims. Firstly, we believe the fact that New Labour is making policy on masculinity is worth asserting, as it is a new observation in the social policy literature (although see Featherstone, 2000). Secondly, we aim to discuss the implications of some of New Labour's social policy for men and women. We begin by introducing the topic of masculinity as a social problem.

Masculinity as a social problem

Collier (1998) and Connell (2000), amongst others, remind us that in relation to a range of issues, including crime, parenting, working with children, child support, sexuality, marriage and divorce, the behaviour of men has been called into question in media, academic and political discourse across the Western world. The fact that the topic of masculinity seems to be considered 'good copy' in much of the media, and not just in the intellectual press, is an indication of its currency and accessibility. Whilst the 'problem of men' is not a unitary discourse, and does not arise from a homogenous set of concerns, but comes from several different directions and focuses on a variety of behaviours, it is possible to outline two fundamentally different approaches that define this social problem. This distinction is rather crude, but may be of some use to people in navigating this increasingly complex terrain of masculinity discourse. The two approaches are men as perpetrators and men as victims. According to the first approach, men are a source of danger and disorder, an anti-social influence. There is, here, an emphasis on the privileges of masculinity (Messner, 1997). According to the second approach men are facing greater disadvantage in society than women. It is men who are the 'unprotected sex' to cite the title of Patrick Jones's recent play. Here the emphasis is on the costs of masculinity (Messner, 1997).

The dominant notion in the mainstream media seems to be that of the 'crisis of masculinity'. Some recent and widely disseminated examples of popular academic writings that rely on this notion are Faludi (1999) and Clare (2000). Typically, this crisis discourse draws on both approaches outlined above, in that men are described as exhibiting anti-social and destructive behaviour, but that this is in response to insecurity about their 'role'. In general, there is a fairly heavy emphasis within this discourse on the costs of

masculinity. Ros Coward (1999), a journalist with a feminist heritage, goes as far as to claim that it is men that are now the primary victims of the gender order, rather than women.

In discussing the ways in which masculinity is constructed as a social problem, we have to address the ontological question of whether masculinity is really a problem. The writings of Kitsuse and Spector (1973) have shown us we should pay attention to how claims are made about the extent to which social phenomena constitute social problems, and about the relative importance of social problems. This view has in turn been criticised as, amongst other things, deflecting attention away from action to alleviate social problems. A contextual constructionist approach (Best, 1989), however, allows for both the examination of how social phenomena come to be seen as social problems and also for an acceptance that material reality (in this case what men are *really* like) will affect the construction of social problems. Such an approach is the most useful to our topic. The process whereby issues become social problems involves mediation of concerns by media, academia, government, and street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980). Our paper will concentrate on the construction of masculinity as a social problem within the government of New Labour.

The public and the private

As Lister (2000) observes, traditionally the social policy discipline has seen the relationship between the public and the private in terms of the relationship between the state and the market. Feminism has challenged these limited definitions, and opened up an analysis of the private, domestic sphere, the traditional realm of women. Our discussion of New Labour politics follows this feminist distinction between what goes on outside the home (the public sphere) and what goes on inside the home (the private). Bailey (2000) has recently challenged this distinction, along with several other taken-for-granted distinctions between public and private. He argues that identifying the family as the most significant private realm constrains the extensiveness of our conception of the private. Also, it is important to note that Fairclough argues the feminist public-private distinction is challenged by New Labour's social authoritarianism:

Blair represents the family as sort of public space – he constructs the family through a discourse that is more usually applied to public institutions such as schools, representing family life in a formal and distanced way by emptying it of its intimacy through applying to it public categories such as 'mutual respect' and 'acceptable conduct' (Fairclough, 2000: 43).

In the light of conceptual problems of the public/private labels, we are using the headings of 'in the home' and 'outside the home'. Our argument is, in short, that we can see in the politics of New Labour a policy optimism about men inside the home, and a policy pessimism about men outside, whereas, in contrast, there is pessimism about women inside the home, and optimism about women outside. We further argue that optimism and pessimism tend to

lead to different sorts of policy responses. Where New Labour is optimistic, it tends to produce policies that are encouraging and facilitative. This is true of those policies that are designed to assist men as fathers and women as public figures. Where New Labour is pessimistic, it can produce policies that are authoritarian. This is true of its use of criminal justice measures to deal with essentially social policy problems - police powers to round up truants, for example.

Men in the home

Fiona Williams (1998) has identified concerns about both father absence and father distance in contemporary social policy discourse on fatherhood. She notes that concern with father distance has been expressed both by those who see the problem as one of men being denied opportunities to be closely involved with their children (Burgess and Ruxton, 1990) and also by those who see the problem as men's avoidance of responsibilities (Campbell, 1993). We agree with Featherstone (2000) that New Labour is generally positive about fathers, and we see government policies broadly sympathetic with Burgess and Ruxton's (1990) arguments about the need to remove institutional barriers to men spending more time with their children. In terms of Messner's (1997) terrain of the politics of masculinities, New Labour policies on fatherhood are therefore more focused on the costs of masculinity than on its privileges.

There have been several statements from ministers about what they see as the crucial importance of fathers to the well-being of children, and boys especially. Paul Boateng made this point strongly in the Ministerial Seminar (Home Office, 1998a) as did Jane Kennedy (1999) at a London conference on services for fathers. Ministers tend to refer to unspecified 'research' in support of this argument, despite the fact that research evidence on the effects of father absence on children is at the very least equivocal (Featherstone, 2000) if not spurious (Connell, 2000). We do not concur, however, with Johnson's (1999: 98) claim that 'New Labour's emphasis on the family is... virtually indistinguishable from the conservative policies in this area'. New Labour has certainly struck a more positive note in relation to involving fathers in the *care* of children than the previous administration, which will chiefly be remembered for its emphasis on the solely economic obligations of fathers through its setting up of the Child Support Agency.

It is also important to note Featherstone's (2000) observation that the emphasis on fathers varies across departments. As might have been anticipated, given the lengthy tradition identified earlier, the Home Office has led the way, with the Green Paper on the family, *Supporting Families*, for example, making conscious reference to 'the needs of young men and the support available to fathers' (Home Office, 1998b: 48). This department has also funded fathers' projects under its family support grant. This is relatively small funding compared to other types of social spending, but it is significant that a government considers it important to spend on projects specifically geared towards helping fathers. There is little evidence yet about the ideological orientation of these funded fathers' projects. However, the overriding impression from the 1999 London conference 'Developing Effective

Services for Fathers', organised by some of the funded organisations, was of the need to make societal attitudes to fathers more positive, with the implication that it is not fathers themselves whose behaviour is the problem, but rather some other groups – social workers perhaps, or even women. As far as other government departments are concerned, Sure Start is the most generous of New Labour developments in family policy, and although the 'spin' on the first batch of programmes funded in England made some specific mention of interventions geared towards fathers, the initiative overall is arguably focused largely on mothers and children.

The New Labour government has made family friendly work policies a priority, in the form of the Parental Leave Directive, Working Time Directive and Part-time work Directive. Lewis (1992) has observed that Britain has a strong male breadwinner tradition compared to other European welfare states. Because of the initial lack of financial backing to these new measures, there has been no significant overall shift to men spending more time in the home. What is interesting from the point of view of the politics of masculinity is again the optimistic view of fathering on which the policies are based. There is an assumption that British men want to spend more time with their children and less in work, an assumption that may not be borne out. The Government is keen to stress the evidence we have for men's desire to move from work to home (Department of Education and Employment, 2000a), but this use of research is again very selective, and indicates the optimistic assumptions that underpin New Labour family policy. This optimism about men is also reflected in Third Way thinking. Giddens (1998) describes the 'democratic family', which is based on a gender equality men are keen to embrace.

Featherstone (2000) concludes that the setting up of fathers as solutions to social problems denies both the complexities of men's lives and the dangers that some men can pose in families. There are indications that men who are the cause of family problems are seen as outside of the realm of fathering described by Home Office Ministers. There is also little conception that such men can change (see Bright and Ryle, 2000). Wife beaters and sex offenders are constructed as non-fathers. Both the policy optimism and policy pessimism approach of New Labour gloss over some important facts. Sexual crimes are presented as the work of men outside the home and therefore are treated with pessimism and authoritarian policies, although we know that sexual abuse is much more likely to occur within the home than outside it.

Women in the home

The primary focus of this paper is upon men as objects of New Labour policy-making. However, there are connections with policies which are focused upon women and we need, very briefly, to touch upon these.

Essentially, the argument put forward here is that if New Labour takes a policy-optimistic view of men within the home, its approach to women has been the opposite. The dominant emphasis here has been upon the *problem* of women remaining unreasonably at home at the tax-payer's expense and, as New Labour would argue, at the expense of their own long-term economic prospects. The first term of the Blair administration has developed a policy approach of creeping compulsion in support of this essentially ideological

position. Early New Deal arrangements for lone parents, for example, were surrounded by Ministerial protestations about the voluntary nature of any participation. By the end of the period, that voluntarism was under severe strain, with engagement in the scheme based on requirement rather than encouragement. The Budget of March 2001 altered the rules for lone parent benefit claimants. The Treasury Press Release explained the change in this way:

from April 2002, all lone parents on Income Support will be required to attend work-focused interviews and an additional interview will be introduced at the six-month stage in the Income Support claim (HM Treasury 2001).

In relation to child-bearing itself, it could be argued, New Labour developed a progressive record, extending maternity allowances and maternity leave. Once child-bearing was over, however, New Labour prefers to see women move rapidly out of the home and into the workplace. Yet, at the same time as promoting the participation of women in the workforce, the Blair government also developed a formidable set of expectations of women-as-parents. Here, too, in the terms adopted in this paper, the policy approach was essentially authoritarian rather than facilitative. Parents are problem people for New Labour, needing to be shaped-up to meet their responsibilities in education, health and conduct.

On 23rd March 2001, for example, speaking to the Secondary Heads Association, David Blunkett further 'plans to be tough on parents who are abusive, obstructive or who won't take responsibility for their children's behaviour' (Department for Education and Employment, 2001). It is no surprise, perhaps, to find policy announcements being made through the Home Office, rather than the Department of Education, as in the April 2000 when Schools Minister Jacqui Smith was quoted in support of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, by saying:

We must crack down on truancy. Evidence shows that truants are more likely to drift into crime, be unemployed and earn less than children who attend school regularly.

Under the Bill parents of persistent truants would face increased fines of up to £5,000 and, unlike the present position, would have to attend court or face arrest. Irresponsible parents who fail to do enough to ensure their children get a good education would have to face up to their responsibilities (Home Office, 2000).

The point we wish to make is that, in practice, the burden of official disapproval in these matters is carried by mothers. While governments may talk of 'parents', the impact of policies to fine the parents of truants or bind-over the parents of children appearing before the Courts falls quite disproportionately upon mothers not fathers. In research conducted by one of the authors, for example, mothers were held responsible for the behaviour of their children by the Courts, even on those rare occasions when fathers were also present (*self-citation*, 1996).

Men outside the home

In this section of the paper we move on to discuss the politics of New Labour in relation to men in the public sphere. Particularly relevant here is the attention paid to boys failing in schools, and men's ill health and crime, as well as the less consciously masculinised area of employment policy.

New Labour is concerned with health inequalities in ways that Thatcher's and Major's administration were not. There has been some attempt to combine gender and class dimensions in tackling men's ill health. The Department of Health has been keen to stress that life expectancy for men in the highest social classes is 5 years more than men in the lowest social classes (Department of Health, 1998a). Of course governmental attention to men's health can be seen as pro-men in as much as the aim is improved longevity and quality of life for men. The rhetoric is, however, at times one of blame, with the implication that working class men are themselves responsible for social inequalities in health. Tessa Jowell stated in 1998 that

The culture of heavy drinking, heavy smoking and eating too much fatty food inevitably leads to health problems.....We are working to improve things, through the Social Exclusion Unit, and a co-ordinated approach across Government, but there is a shared responsibility and every individual can do something to help themselves (Department of Health, 1998b)

The Department of Health (1998) booklet, *Life Begins at 40*, subtitled *Health tips for men*, for example, was launched at Langham Club, a working men's club in North London and circulated through rugby clubs, sports clubs and other working men's outlets. The *tips* included information on smoking, stress and exercise and other advice to help 'men think harder about how they live their lives.'

The most clearly masculinised of all New Labour policies is of course the focus on the supposed under-achievement of boys. There could be debate about which policies reinforce particular models of masculinity, but we mean *masculinised* here in the sense that men are named as men. Gender and achievement is a contested policy issue. In particular, some feminists have characterised a concern with boys' performance as 'oh, you mean they're not doing better than girls any more, like they should' (quoted in Epstein *et al.*, 1998) and have rejected the claim that boys are underachieving (e.g. Delamont, 2000; see also Gorard *et al.*, 1999). There are tensions evident in New Labour's approach to the issue. On the one hand the attack on 'laddish' culture could be seen as an attack on masculinity's privilege of irresponsibility. However, the concern with intervening to boost boys' performance could also be seen a shoring up of male dominance, when seen in the context of the recent history of girls being seen as the under-achievers, and men's continuing dominance in so much social and economic life across the globe (Connell, 2000).

The mainstream solutions proposed to boys' 'underachievement' are certainly not going to challenge the presumption of dominance. David Blunkett has been quoted (in Roberts, 2000) as saying there is a danger of resentment about the 'aggressive assertiveness' of equal opportunities for women. He has proposed that boys needed 'better male role models' inside and outside school, pointing to primary and nursery schools, where 83% of teachers are women (Woodward, 2000). In the same article, he also offers, as proof of action being taken, the changing of primary school reading lists to make books more stimulating for boys, and the use of professional footballers to help promote after-school study centres. The Department of Education and Employment's 'Gender and Achievement' website uses as an example of good practice the 'Boys' Literacy' project at Sunnymede Junior School. This project created a 'boyzone' of books on 'boy's themes' and when choosing men to speak to 'Dad's assemblies', chose a police officer and businessman. In none of these interventions are either the masculinities that might underpin an anti-learning culture or those that assume a right to dominate girls being questioned. There has been some very interesting work done on offering alternative non-macho models of masculinity to boys in school (e.g. Salisbury and Jackson, 1996), but these approaches do not feature strongly in the government's gender and education policies.

Another important issue to consider in an overview of men outside the home is the new emphasis on gender in relation to anti-social and criminal behaviour. It was this concern with the damaging behaviour of young men that was the most significant reason for the Home Office to sponsor a seminar on masculinity in 1998. Arguments such as those of Bea Campbell (1993) about lawless masculinity in troubled estates have to some extent become mainstream in the politics of New Labour. As Hearn (1998) points out, there is some continuity in the discourse about young men and crime with older preoccupations with a 'dangerous underclass'. There is also a newer focus on the masculine deficit, that is, the gap between what working class young men expect out of life as men and their actual life chances. In many discussions of working class young men, including those in New Labour circles (see Home Office, 1998a), there is reference made to the 'crisis of masculinity' idea, namely that working class young men do not know what is expected of them any more, especially in the context of the demise of manufacturing and other heavy industries. There is little emphasis on questioning traditional roles for young men. The idea that sport can help fill gaps in young men's lives (para 18 of Home Office 1998a) reinforces traditional ideas of working class masculinity predicated on competition and physicality. The principal solutions proposed by New Labour to the social disorder connected with poverty are employment and criminal justice. The New Deal is a generous investment aimed at the unemployed, and, according to Levitas's (1998) critique, unemployed men in particular. The underlying assumption is perhaps the traditional one that young men need a job to tame them.

As to criminal justice, New Labour's response to the 'problem' of men and crime, and young men in particular, has been straightforwardly authoritarian. Here measures of suppression have been presented as 'welfare' (for Mr Blair's description of curfews as 'child protection' see Drakeford and Butler, 1999) and access to welfare made subject to behavioural compliance (see Butler and Drakeford, 2001).

The practical consequences of this approach are worth a brief consideration. For the young men who are the object of this government's criminal justice policy, the destination, in increasing numbers, is to be found in the institutional conditions described by the Chief Inspector of Prisons (2001) in his Report on Brinsford Youth Custody Centre as containing 'a level of neglect and lack of understanding of the needs of young prisoners that was breathtaking'. Here, young men whose previous history was characterised by a degree of social neglect which the Report describes as 'frightening', were subjected to levels of self-harm, fear for safety and bullying which, the Inspector concluded, 'puts most of its juvenile population at risk...on entry'. In an astonishing conclusion, he suggests that child protection procedures had never been invoked at the institution because, the outcomes of such an investigation 'would challenge the fundamentals of the existing regime'.

There is negativity towards men outside the home in the *rhetoric* of New Labour, particularly in the blaming of working class young men for wider social problems –crime, bad health and laddish culture. But New Labour *policies* can also be seen as attempting to shore up traditional working class masculinity based on manly work and manly leisure. There is mention of young men as fathers in the Ministerial Seminar, but the policy priorities in terms of spending have been employment and control. The New Deal and action on underachievement of boys can of course be seen as a concerted effort to shore up young men's positions in society, and maintain their social advantage over women. Whereas to a limited extent within the home New Labour has an optimistic role-broadening view of men, outside the home it has a pessimistic view that relies upon role-narrowing and a punitive and authoritarian reaction to those who stray beyond it. As Segal notes,

the governing image of masculinity New Labour extols is virile disciplinarianism and strict paternalism (Segal, 2001: ??).

Women outside the home

If New Labour is infested with policy pessimism in relation to men in public places, it is possible to suggest that, for the 1997 government, a woman's place was outside the home. An earlier section of the paper traced some of the enforcement measures which the Blair administration was prepared to take in support of this approach in the employment field, an approach which Annesley (2001: 211) suggests had led to the paradox of training lone mothers to work as childminders through the New Deal: 'paid to look after other people's children but not supported to care for their own at home'.

In other policy areas it is possible to identify examples of policy-optimism in relation to women in the public sphere which have been successfully achieved during the New Labour period. In politics itself, the Labour Party, albeit with ambivalence, set-backs and a not-unblemished record, nevertheless remains the political organisation which has taken the most effective steps to increase the participation of women. The National Assembly for Wales, for example, has a Labour group in which women are a majority and a Cabinet in which women outnumber men – the only democratic legislature in the world of which this is true. The New Labour period has been

one in which women's occupation of senior public positions has increased. Our point is not to suggest that under New Labour women suddenly took over the commanding heights of the public world. Rather, it is to highlight a contrast with the pessimism about women in the home.

Discussion and conclusions

New Labour responds to the 'problem of men' in a variety of ways. There are policy areas where men/boys have been very overtly named, parenting and education being obvious examples. In relation to some other policy issues, such as employment, there has been a less explicit gender dimension in government documents, but it is widely acknowledged that policy initiatives are directed largely towards men. Our overall argument in this paper has been that New Labour can be seen as optimistic about men inside the home, and pessimistic about men outside whereas, in contrast, there is policy pessimism about women inside the home, and policy optimism about women outside. We added an important proviso in relation to men in the public sphere that although political rhetoric is often negative about men, actual policies could be seen as representing the retrenchment of traditional masculinities predicated on social advantage.

An interesting question that remains is why the attention to masculinity now? The surfacing of conscious masculinity policies is a high profile example of the 'problem of men' discourse in contemporary society that we mentioned earlier in the paper. Especially influential has been the 'masculine deficit' idea. This is the notion that socially excluded men, who do not have access to respectable masculine resources of social power such as employment, are more likely to construct a masculine identity that is anti-social. This idea, with nuances, is the basis of the more sophisticated theories of Segal (1990), Messerschmidt (1993) and Connell (1995). There are very different options open to policy-makers for responding to this perceived masculine deficit. On the one hand, there could potentially be an attempt to challenge the presumption of dominance. Alternatively measures could be taken to shore up the traditional socio-economic base of men's privilege.

There are indications that New Labour policies are more inclined towards the latter strategy than the first, and this choice also needs to be understood in the context of wider discourse on the politics of gender. Mahony (1998) argues that the preoccupation with the under-achievement of boys has to be seen as part of global preoccupation with the erosion of the men's power - 'what about the boys?' as she puts it. There is a view, expressed by David Blunkett's words on the aggressive assertive of equal opportunities for women, that men are suffering post-feminism. This idea is especially applied to the labour market, which has changed substantially and moved away from manly heavy industry. Epstein *et al* (1998) call this emphasis on the difficulties for men post-feminism the 'poor boys' discourse.

To an extent, New Labour politicians are attempting to mark out a Third Way between feminism and men's rights, or between men's rights and men's responsibilities. This is difficult to achieve when, as Connell (2000: 149, citing Gilbert and Gilbert, 1998) observes about the education debate, 'the media love to turn the issue into a pro-girl or pro-boy (or pro-feminist versus anti-

feminist) shoot out'. Paul Boateng, in the Ministerial Seminar on masculinity, tried to avoid both describing boys as 'the cause of problems within society' and also 'setting young men up against young women, as if the advances which had been achieved for young women, and which were to be celebrated, had somehow been won at the expense of young men' (Home Office, 1998:1)

This paper has only sought to raise some possible interpretations of policies and generally to draw attention to the high profile of masculinity in the politics of New Labour. There is clearly a need for further investigation of contemporary public policy and masculinity. Our understanding of the effects of New Labour policies on masculinity would, for example, be enhanced by empirical research on initiatives to improve the underachievement of boys and the ideological orientation and outcomes of fathers projects.

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