

SITUATING THE BLAIR MEMBERSHIP BOOM WITHIN ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Ross Bond

One of the most remarkable features of the 'New Labour' phenomenon under Tony Blair has been the considerable growth in Party membership since his accession to the leadership in July 1994. In the two years up to 1997, membership rose by some 200,000 people (according to the Labour Party **Membership Administration and Recruitment** booklet) and by the first days of that year exceeded 400,000 (*The Scotsman* 3 January 1997), the highest recorded figure since 1979 (Katz and Mair 1992, p.847). This increase has certainly run contrary to trends in political party membership and to academic opinion on the likely future direction of the political party as an institution. Webb, for example, observes that the percentage of registered electors who were members of the three major British political parties fell from 9.4% in 1964 to 2% in 1992. He thus concludes that 'possibly the most clear-cut indication of the growth of popular alienation from political parties is provided by *the decline of party membership*' (Webb 1995, p.306, emphasis in the original).

This stark contrast between academic opinion and current membership figures clearly invites further investigation, and therefore provided the impetus for a study of the New Labour phenomenon within a Scottish context. This took the form of a survey of Party members carried out by the author during the summer of 1997. The aims of this survey can be summarised under two principal headings. Firstly, from a social perspective, the intention was to build up a fairly detailed profile of these new members

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which would facilitate a comparison with their more well-established counterparts, and indeed with the population as a whole. In short, an attempt to answer the question 'Who are Labour's new members?' by focusing upon the following areas:

Class

Was the perception of Labour's new members as largely middle-class accurate? The argument that the political arena is increasingly dominated by the middle classes is by no means new. The central thesis of Hindess's **The Decline of Working-Class Politics** in 1971, for example, was that the proportion of the working classes involved at all levels of party politics had been declining over the previous 20 years and continued to do so. Seyd and Whiteley's 1990 survey of Labour members found that, while nearly half belonged to the salariat, only around a quarter could be considered working class (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p.33). More recently, commentators such as Lashmar have argued that 'the middle class has seized hold of the Labour Party' (Lashmar 1994, p.19).

Age

A Demos survey from 1995 suggests comparatively low rates of political activism within younger age groups, revealing that 9% of men and 3% of women aged 18-24 were involved in political activism, compared to 24% and 17% respectively in the 35-54 age band (**New Statesman** 29 September 1995, p.5). With more specific reference to the Labour Party, a survey of 1,055 new members carried out by the party newspaper, **Labour Party News**, found that only 10% of new members in this survey sample were aged under 25 (**New Statesman** 30 June 1995, p.8). Seyd and Whiteley's study found an even lower incidence of young members, with only 5% of their sample aged 25 or younger and an overall mean age of 48 (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p.32).

Gender

Seyd and Whiteley's study suggested a 61/39 male:female split in the membership (p.32), while the **Labour Party News** survey also found that two-thirds of Labour's new members were men, suggesting that male predomination within the Party continues. Within a Scottish context, the question of gender is obviously of great topical interest, given the recent debate and controversy surrounding proposed attempts to generate gender-balance within the new Parliament.

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The second major area of consideration for the survey related more specifically to respondents' membership of the Labour Party. This political dimension entailed analysis within the following areas:

Political opinions and ambitions

What are the political priorities of members in terms of their policy preferences? Are new members, as some suggest, largely reformist in their attitudes to the party? Further, in the light of Richard Burden's argument that Labour is becoming a 'vehicle for those who want to go into politics rather than a radical party with a definable ideological base' (**The Guardian**, 11 August 1995, p.13), what are the political ambitions of the new members?

Activism

Just how active are Labour's members? Are the levels of activity of new members significantly different and if so what can this tell us about the changing nature of the Party?

Why do people choose to become and remain a labour party member?

What do individuals derive from their membership? The Party's own literature cites several positive benefits from membership, namely the election of candidates, consultation on policy, election activism, and participation in social and fund-raising events (**New Labour, New Life for Britain**). Are these indeed the principal reasons for continuing membership? The recent Labour membership boom also appears to highlight a number of discrepancies between the theory and practice of political participation, given that there has been a long and relatively consistent trend in sociological and political thinking which has predicted the increasing decline of formal political organisations such as the party in favour of single issue groups, best exemplified by the 'New Social Movements'. Inglehart's **The Silent Revolution** (1977) was an early example of this trend, with its central thesis that among 'secure' Western populations a shift in concern was taking place from material to non-material issues (Inglehart 1977, p.23). Inglehart argued that this would be reflected in a decline in support for national institutions and would bring changes in political participation with 'top-down' mobilization being replaced by non-hierarchical, issue-oriented groups (Inglehart 1977, pp.4-5). Clearly these trends, if correctly identified, would have a deleterious effect upon the established political parties. Indeed, some have even argued that parties were becoming 'the institutional dinosaurs of a changing political landscape' (Mulgan and Jacques, cited in Webb 1995, p.301). At one time, it seemed as if the Labour Party was indeed falling

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victim to these trends. Prior to Blair's leadership, recruitment drives aimed at reversing the membership decline of the 1980s had largely failed. As Timmins comments, 'the conventional wisdom seemed right - that political parties were in decline, losing out to single-issue pressure groups such as Greenpeace and campaigns over the homeless, child poverty or roads' (**The Independent**, 21 January 1995). Since Blair's accession to the party leadership in the summer of 1994, however, Labour's membership figures appear to be defying such arguments. How can this apparent paradox be explained?

Further analysis of the above three areas relating to Party membership, together with the social profile of new members which the survey would generate, therefore had the potential to illuminate any changes in political participation which might be taking place within the Labour Party. Any such changes could be viewed as being of particular relevance within a specifically Scottish context. There is currently much debate and controversy surrounding the issue of Labour's selection of prospective candidates for the new parliament. Many in the Party believe that this selection process is favouring those of a 'modernising' bent and that the left of the Party is being unfairly marginalised as a result. It will therefore be interesting to discover to what extent the profile of the membership is undergoing a similar shift toward a 'modernising' perspective, given that the Party might possibly be concerned to ensure that the candidates it selects are reasonably representative of the views of the broader membership, as well as the electorate they seek to attract.

DATA

An attempt to elucidate all the above areas of interest took the form of a survey based upon the members of four Constituency Labour Parties in the Edinburgh area. Because of the need to generate representative data, a postal questionnaire was selected as the principal means of investigation. This questionnaire was divided into two sections, the first dealing with personal details and the second with attitudes and opinions relating to Party membership. The random sample to which the questionnaires were distributed was derived from membership lists provided by the Constituency Party secretaries. In all, 725 questionnaires and letters were posted out in June 1997. A total of 402 replies was received, representing a response rate of 55%, which compares favourably with postal questionnaires generally.

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Before analysing the data derived from these returned questionnaires it should be noted that the fact that the sample of Labour members was drawn from a specific locality might obviously raise questions about the generalisability of the findings. For instance, we could reasonably expect Scottish respondents to differ from Labour members in other parts of Britain in aspects of their social profile such as housing and education, and quite possibly in their political attitudes. It is also important to be aware that the city of Edinburgh can by no means be regarded as representative of Scotland as a whole. Therefore, the analysis and interpretation of the results endeavours - where possible - to recognise the geographical location of the survey. However, other methodological aspects such as the random selection of the original sample and the postal distribution of the questionnaires contribute to the generalisability of the data. Add to this the satisfactory level of response and the comparatively large data set which this has provided, and there are good reasons to suppose that wider conclusions can be drawn from the findings.

The analysis of this data involved two levels of comparison. Firstly, where appropriate to the data under consideration, statistics relating to the sample of respondents as a whole were compared to corresponding figures for the wider population which were drawn from a variety of statistical sources. The second level of comparison was internal to the sample population itself, in that every effort was made to compare the Labour Party's newer members with their older counterparts (it should be noted that the terms 'old' and 'older' in this report refer to the duration of membership, not members' chronological age). 'New' members were defined as those who had joined the Party from the year 1994 onwards. Although this would include a number of people who joined Labour before Tony Blair became leader, this seemed preferable to using 1995 as the starting point and excluding some of 'Blair's new members'. Indeed, my own data appear to support the use of 1994 as a starting point for 'new' members and to provide a small representation of the coincidence of Blair's leadership and Labour's recruitment boom. While only 18 of my respondents joined the Party in 1993, this figure rises to 27 in 1994 and then, most strikingly of all, to 49 and 45 in the years 1995 and 1996 respectively - the two full years of Blair's leadership covered by the survey. In all, around one-third of respondents who recorded the year they joined the Party - 130 cases - fell into the category of 'new member'. This provided a sufficiently large sub-sample of new members to be able to make general statements about this category of member with some confidence.

In the period since my own survey was carried out, details of a similar study by Seyd and Whiteley, also completed during 1997, have become available.

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This survey also focused upon the issue of new members, and indeed defined the latter in an identical fashion to myself (those who have joined Labour in 1994 and after). However, this survey was based upon a much larger random sample (in excess of 5,000 members) derived from Labour's British national membership database. It is therefore interesting, where possible, to draw comparisons between Seyd and Whiteley's findings and my own geographically-specific study. All statistics relating to this study are drawn from Seyd and Whiteley's paper 'New Labour - New Grass Roots Party?', presented at the annual meeting of the Political Studies Association, University of Keele, April 1998 or the electronic transcript from the proceedings of the 'New Labour and the Labour Movement' conference held at Sheffield University on 19th and 20th June 1998 (Seyd and Whiteley 1998).

NEW LABOUR, NEW CLASS? AN ANALYSIS OF THE PARTY'S GRASS ROOTS

Social class: subjective and objective indicators

One of the central questions surrounding Labour's new members was whether the perception that they were largely middle-class was accurate. Three questions from the survey are particularly relevant to this issue. Firstly, a question asked in the 1997 Scottish Election Survey (SES) was replicated. This aimed to measure levels of subjective class identification by asking respondents whether they felt they belonged to the middle or working class. The data derived from all members showed an approximate 50-50 split in class identification. This contrasts interestingly with the provisional results from the SES, in which 67% of respondents described themselves as working class, a figure which rises to 76% among Labour voters. What should also be observed from my own data, however, is that there is no evidence to suggest that new members are any more likely to identify themselves as middle class. Seyd and Whiteley's 1997 study also found no significant difference in the subjective social class of the two groups of member.

The present study also measured the objective class of those in paid work by classifying their occupations according to the Goldthorpe class categories (see Marshall 1988, p.22). Table 1 shows the data for all respondents who were in paid employment.

As with class identity, there was no statistically significant difference between new and older members. The most interesting feature here,

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however, is that while less than half of all respondents defined themselves as middle-class, this objective measure of those in paid employment shows that 75% belong to the two highest socio-economic groups. However, it should be noted that a substantial minority of respondents (36.9%) were in fact economically inactive (for the purposes of the survey I included in this category all those not in some form of paid employment). Once again, the corresponding figure of 38.4% for new members is broadly similar, as indeed is the 41% of new members in the aforementioned **Labour Party News** survey who were not in any kind of paid employment and the 42% of all members in Seyd and Whiteley's 1997 study. However, it should be noted that such levels of economic inactivity are by no means unusually high. In fact, in 1996 only 56% of all Scots aged 16+ were employed including those in part-time and self-employment (**Regional Trends**, 32, 1997), compared to a total of 62.3% of my respondents. The most recent available corresponding data for the Edinburgh area show a broadly similar figure, with 43% of the adult population not in any type of paid employment (1991 Census, **Lothian Region**, pt.1, p.183).

Table 1
Social class

Respondent's socio-economic group	Frequency	Percentage
Goldthorpe Class 1 (higher grade professionals and administrators)	88	36.8
Class 2 (lower grade professionals and administrators)	92	38.5
Class 3 (routine non-manual)	18	7.5
Class 4 (small proprietors)	2	0.8
Class 5 (manual supervisors; lower grade technicians)	4	1.7
Class 6 (skilled manual)	11	4.6
Class 7 (semi-skilled and unskilled)	24	10.0

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manual)

Total number replying 239

Because of the substantial minority of the sample who were not in paid employment, it was clearly possible that this group was producing the discrepancy between subjective and objective class. To check this possibility, all respondents were recoded into two categories: in paid employment or not. This data was then cross-tabulated with the data relating to subjective class. This procedure showed that those not in paid employment are indeed more likely to define themselves as working-class. While only 48% of those in paid employment considered themselves to be working class, this figure rose to 60% when considering those not in any form of paid employment. This is an interesting finding, because it runs counter to any expectation that Labour members might derive their working-class credentials and indeed their Party identification from their place within the socio-economic structure. What should also be noted, however, is that this relationship is not sufficiently strong to account entirely for the disparity between subjective and objective class outlined earlier. This contrast within the sample therefore remains an interesting aspect of the findings.

Another striking aspect of the socio-economic profile of the respondent group is the comparatively large numbers of those in employment who belong to social classes 1 and 2 on the Goldthorpe scale. As detailed above, such people account for 75% of all respondents. In comparison, only 64% of Seyd and Whiteley's 1997 respondents belonged to the salariat, a contrast which probably reflects Edinburgh's relative affluence. However, 1991 census data for Edinburgh as a whole show that only 44% of households fell into this group. It therefore appears that Labour members - both new and old - disproportionately belong to the higher socio-economic classes.

Social class: Housing, Education, Health and Income

There are, however, other features of the questionnaire data aside from respondents' socio-economic group which might be interpreted as indicators of class position. The survey included questions on respondents' housing tenure, their own and their children's education, their levels of participation in private health schemes, and their total household income. The table below shows the housing tenure of the sample.

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Even considering that owner-occupation in Edinburgh is high compared to Scotland as a whole (in 1991, 66% compared to 52%), the 82% private ownership amongst my own sample is remarkably extensive (**Scottish Abstract of Statistics** 1996, p.92; **Edinburgh Facts and Figures**, p.5). Even allowing for some change over the last 6 years, the data would still suggest that Labour members have patterns of housing much more likely to be associated with the middle-class than do the wider population.

With regard to the education of respondents and their families, 16% had sent their children to private school while 22% had attended such schools themselves. In contrast, in September 1996 less than 4% of all Scottish schoolchildren attended independent schools (**Scottish Education Statistics** 1997, p.7). Although only a minority of respondents had an exposure to private education, then, this level of exposure is still substantially higher than that found in the wider population, although once again some allowance would have to be made for the fact that provision of private schooling is much higher in Edinburgh than in other parts of Scotland. A more striking and direct comparison, however, is offered by the comparative data for educational qualifications. Once again the city of Edinburgh is something of an anomaly in this respect, with 22.6% of its adult residents holding a degree or professional qualification (**Edinburgh Facts and Figures**, p.22). The corresponding figure for my Labour members, shown in Table 3, is 54.5%, another indicator that the Labour members' housing is more middle-class than the wider population.

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Total number of respondents 402

With regard to private health insurance, only 10.7% of respondents were covered by such schemes, which is lower than the 15% found in 1993 the last time this question was asked in the British Social Attitudes survey (Jowell et al 1994, p.55). However, a significant relationship was found between new membership and the holding of such insurance. New members are more likely to take out private health cover than are their older counterparts: exactly half of all those with such insurance were new members.

An analysis of mean income appears to confirm the relatively affluent nature of Labour's membership. While the average gross annual household income in Scotland for the financial year 1995-6 was £17,494 (**Scottish Abstract of Statistics** 1996, p.189), the average household income of survey respondents who answered this question was substantially higher at £29,481. Even allowing again for a possible 'Edinburgh effect' this would still appear to be a significant difference.

Table 3
Educational qualifications

Highest Educational Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Degree/Professional	219	54.5
Higher/A-level	56	13.9
HNC	3	0.7
ONC	2	0.5
Standard/O-grade	27	6.7
Completed Apprenticeship	18	4.5
City and Guilds	4	1.0
SVQ/NVQ	5	1.2
CSE/GCSE	5	1.2
None	63	15.7
Total number of respondents	402	

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Taking all of the above evidence into account, then, and assuming that my sample is representative, it would appear that perceptions of Labour members as predominantly middle-class are well-founded. More importantly for the remit of the study, however, is the corresponding evidence that, on the whole, Labour's new members are no more 'middle-class' than their more well-established counterparts. With the exception of private health insurance, not one of the areas which could be considered as related directly or indirectly to social class - subjective social class, socio-economic group by occupation, housing tenure, education, or income - shows any statistically significant difference between new and older members. Labour's new members may be middle-class, but they are no more so than Labour members as a whole. Overall, these conclusions also offer an interesting contrast to those of Seyd and Whiteley: I cannot offer any statistically significant evidence to support their conclusion that new members are more working class, less affluent and less educated (Seyd and Whiteley 1998, p.19).

What of the other aspects of the members' social profile which are more distinct from the issue of social class? What do they suggest about the membership as a whole, and will they reveal any significant differences between new and older members?

Age

The figures from my sample of Labour members shown in table 4 indicate that only 3.7% of respondents were aged under 25, while only 14% were under 35. In contrast, 21.4% came from the 65+ age group.

Table 4
Age

Respondent's Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
15-24	15	3.7
25-34	41	10.2
35-44	95	23.6
45-54	101	25.1
55-64	63	15.7
65-74	55	13.7

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75+	31	7.7
N/A	1	0.2
Total Number of Respondents	402	

Although there are some differences among the newer members, these are not substantial. Newer members are better represented in the under 25 category, but this is slightly distorted by the fact that, because of the minimum joining age of 15, some of those under 25 must by implication be new members. It is also true that only half as many new members belonged to this age group than were over 65. This evidence suggests that young people continue to be comparatively under-represented within the Party. Indeed, while the mean age of all Party members in 1989 was 48 and the mean age of the new members covered in the Labour Party News survey was not substantially lower at 46 (**New Statesman** 30 June 1995, p.8), my own figures show an identical differential but are in fact slightly higher at 50 and 48 respectively. Seyd and Whiteley's 1997 figures are very similar. Their mean ages for membership as a whole and new members are identical to my own. They also report a higher incidence of new members in the under 25 category but, as with my own sample, these new members are substantially outnumbered by their counterparts in the over 65 age group (7% compared to 17%).

Gender

In terms of gender, the **Labour Party News** survey found that two-thirds of new members were male, while Seyd and Whiteley's recent study indicates a split of 63:37 among new members, and 61:39 among members as a whole. My own figures broadly confirm these findings. Of all respondents, 66% were male and the corresponding percentages for new and older members were very similar. This male bias in Party membership is all the more striking when one considers that the gender ratio in the Edinburgh area in 1991 was in fact 48% male: 52% female (**Edinburgh Facts and Figures**, p.4). The provisional figures from the Scottish Election Survey offer an even wider differential among Labour voters, showing that 57% of them were female. Gender is therefore an area in which the Party's membership is clearly unrepresentative of its electoral constituency, and this anomaly should be of particular concern to the Party given its professed desire to see equal numbers of male and female MSPs.

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Other social factors

Analysis of the data derived from the other questions in the first section of the questionnaire produces a similar pattern so far as the comparison between new and old members is concerned. Whether analysis is undertaken of respondents' marital status, their nationality, their religion, or their parents' occupations and voting behaviour, the results are the same: there is no statistically significant difference between new and older Labour members. There is however one interesting exception. My findings suggest a relative disinclination among newer members to be members of a trade union. While more than two-thirds of older members also belong to a trade union, new members are split exactly 50-50 between union members and non-members. These figures might suggest a weaker attachment to the union movement among Labour's new members. A comparison with Seyd and Whiteley's 1997 data is also very interesting. While they too indicate that older members are significantly more likely to belong to a trade union, the overall percentages are much lower than my own, with only 38% of old members and 29% new being trade union members. These figures represent a huge drop from the same authors' 1990 survey in which 64% of Labour members also belonged to a trade union. These contrasts could mean that attachment to the union movement is stronger in Scotland, or that a divergence between Party and union membership is simply at an earlier stage north of the border.

POLITICAL OPINIONS AND AMBITIONS

Having apparently established at least one important difference between the two categories of member in terms of the data which relate to their social and economic characteristics, then, can any more differences now be found in the material which relates more directly to their Party membership?

Mann has remarked that 'although Labour's new troops haven't delivered the expected financial gains, they are helping to turn a membership of which Tony Blair was initially wary into a fully supportive regiment' (**New Statesman** 28 April 1995, p.28). In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate the strength of their support for Blair's recent reforms of the Party. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Level of Agreement with Blair's Reforms

% Older Members % New Members

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Agree Strongly	20.3	27.1
Agree	38.8	55.8
Neither Agree nor Disagree	8.9	9.3
Disagree	22.8	5.4
Disagree Strongly	9.3	2.3
Total Number of Respondents	237	129

The above data appear to support Mann's observation and also establish another important difference between the two groups of member by showing that there is a strong relationship between being a new member and level of support for Blair's reforms. However, it should be noted that, overall, there is widespread agreement with these reforms, with more than two-thirds of all members falling into the 'agree strongly' and 'agree' categories while less than a quarter come into the corresponding categories for disagreement. Even among older members the agree: disagree ratio is 59%: 32%. It seems that the claim of the former General Secretary of the Scottish Party, Jack McConnell, that 'all the evidence shows that the vast majority of party members are enthusiastic about the new Labour project' is sustainable (**The Scotsman** 24 February 1997, p.4).

The survey also aimed to measure respondents' opinions regarding the current distribution of power within the Party. The results were highly equivocal. Of those who offered an opinion, only a very small percentage felt that the Party structures should undergo a further centralisation of power, while a substantial minority - 43.5% - felt that the Party was too centralised. This comparison would appear to indicate that there exists widespread concern over this issue. However, a small majority of those who answered were in fact content with the current distribution of power, so it would clearly be inaccurate to state that the Labour membership as a whole is worried about any alleged centralising drift. What must also be considered, however, is whether there are any significant differences within the membership with regard to this issue. Table 6 illustrates the contrasting views of new and older members.

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Table 6
View of Current Party Power Distribution

	% Older Members	% New Members
Too Centralised	52.8	28.0
Under-Centralised	2.8	7.5
About Right	44.4	64.5
Total Number of Respondents	214	107

These results are undoubtedly more unequivocal. There is a clearly significant relationship between being a new member and feeling happy about the current distribution of power within the Party. Once again this would appear to support suggestions that Labour's new members are more pro-leadership than their older counterparts.

Members were also asked to give their views on Party policy by stating what they felt should be Labour's most important social or economic goal. This elicited some 17 policy preferences of which only the six most mentioned are shown in table 7.

Table 7
Party's Most Important Social or Economic Goal

	Frequency	Percentage
Reduce Inequality	108	29.8
Employment	83	22.9
Health or Welfare	49	13.5
Social Justice	48	13.3
Education	24	6.6
Young People	17	4.7
Total Number of Respondents	329	90.9

These findings replicate those from an identical question in a survey of an English Constituency Labour Party conducted by Bryn Jones. Jones found that a clear majority of members favoured 'traditional Post-War Labour priorities', leading him to conclude that members had not been attracted to the 'post-socialist goals' of the leadership (Jones 1996, pp.521-23). Further, my own questionnaire data also revealed almost identical levels of support for these policy areas amongst both new and older members. From this perspective, then, Labour's new members display the same support for 'traditional' Labour values as do the membership as a whole. Contrary to the data relating to the leadership reforms, these results perhaps suggest that the membership as a whole may not be as 'enthusiastic about the new Labour project' as Jack McConnell would like to think.

Finally, with regard to perceptions of infiltration of the Party by 'career politicians', an attempt was made to measure respondents' political ambitions by giving them the chance to indicate what level of political office (if any) they aspired to. Answers were coded in such a way that only the 'largest' legislature was recorded, while accepting that the relative importance of each legislative body is of course open to debate. European Parliament was therefore given precedence over UK parliament, which was in turn coded before Scottish Parliament, and so on. The resultant figures showed that levels of ambition appear to be fairly low, with nearly two-thirds of respondents professing no desire to hold any kind of political office. There was no statistically significant relationship between political ambition and being a new member, and therefore no evidence to support the view that many of Labour's new members have joined the Party to further their political ambitions. It is also interesting to note that even before the referendum result, the most popular choice among those who did show an interest in political office was the Scottish Parliament. Of all those who held any political ambitions, 27% favoured this body, compared to, for example, the 17% who prioritised Westminster. This could be interpreted as an indicator of the enthusiasm felt for this project and the potential for an entirely new legislative approach which it offers.

ACTIVENESS

The issue of the levels of political activity of Labour's new members is important because it has the potential to tell us much about the ways in

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which the recent recruitment surge may be altering participation and democracy within the Party. Indeed, a common school of thought is that the importance of individual activism is very much in decline, and that the party itself has in fact sought to encourage this decline. In 1994 the Labour MP Peter Hain (now a Government Minister) claimed that 'Labour's grassroots are fed up. ... Resigned to the fact that nobody in the leadership seems to listen to party activists anymore. Indeed, in the new modernised Labourism, "activists" hardly feature' (**New Statesman** 12 August 1994, p.14). Hain also argued that there was little consultation on policy at a local level, that 'power has been centralised to an unprecedented extent'. He contended that the party was deliberately ignoring activists by appealing directly to the individualised member, and that levels of activism were falling as a result - mass membership schemes were designed to encourage passive members.

Hain's arguments receive support from both theoretical and empirical sources. Peter Mair concurs that the apparent trend of intra-party democratization is in fact one of individualization, and that the potentially troublesome activist layer of the party is being marginalised, leaving a membership composed of disaggregated individuals with little real power: 'the process of intra-party democratization is being extended to the members as individuals rather than to what might be called the organized party on the ground. In other words, it is not the party congress or the middle-level elite, or the activists, who are being empowered, but rather the 'ordinary' members, who are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership and by the party in public office' (Mair 1994, p.16). In empirical terms, the **Labour Party News** survey of new members also suggests that they are less than enthusiastic political activists. It found that more than half had never attended a Party meeting, and that two-thirds had never been involved in any local party activity (**New Statesman** 30 June 1995). Such evidence also receives some substantiation from a grassroots view such as that given by the constituency secretary who remarked that many new members 'seem almost non-political. Some are very surprised when they are invited to meetings, or asked to deliver leaflets or participate in fund raising' (**The Independent** 21 January 1995). Indeed, Mann reported (**New Statesman** 28 April 1995, p.28) that the head of Labour's membership development team sought to actively encourage 'those non-political people who nonetheless want a Labour victory and to get the Tories out', by switching the emphasis of party activity from meetings about procedural matters to more social and community-based activities. Are Labour's new members essentially passive then?

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Members in the present survey were asked to record their recent party activities, and these were then weighted according to their perceived level of involvement (for example, displaying a poster was given a '1' rating, delivering leaflets a '2' and canvassing voters '3') and the figures added together to give an overall level of activeness. The mean activeness value for all members was 5.4. More interestingly, however, the mean for new members was substantially lower: 3.7 compared to 6.3 for older members. In order to get a clearer picture of levels of activity as a whole, and of the comparison between new and older members, the values for activeness were recoded into categories (0-2.5, 3-5.5 etc.). While it should be noted that overall levels of activity were quite low, with nearly two-thirds of all respondents falling into the lowest two categories, new members were clearly over-represented in the lowest category, but under-represented at the high levels. While Seyd and Whiteley use a somewhat different method in assessing levels of individual activism, their central finding on this issue is identical to my own: Labour's new members are clearly less active than their older counterparts (Seyd and Whiteley 1998, p.9). It is also important to note these authors' finding that this relative inactivity is not merely because of the incomplete 'socialisation' of the new members. They are not less active primarily because they have only recently joined the Party and are not fully socialised into its norms and values or fully integrated into the local Party organisation. Rather, Seyd and Whiteley suggest that Labour may be recruiting a different type of member, one who favours 'imaginary' as opposed to active participation (Seyd and Whiteley 1998, pp.9-13).

My data regarding individual activism, together with those relating to support for modernising reforms and attitudes to the centralisation of power within the Party, appear to substantiate such conclusions and also offer evidence to support the arguments of Hain and Mair outlined earlier. The survey results suggest that recent trends in recruitment may indeed be leading to a less active and potentially less democratic Party.

Before moving on, it will be useful to pause at this juncture to consider whether two of the major differences between new and older members found thus far - trade union membership and levels of activism - might be related. Are the lower levels of activity found among new members merely a proxy for their weaker union involvement? In fact, a statistical test of this proposal found no significant relationship between current union membership and levels of Party activism, and so it would appear that it is not simply the lower incidence of union membership which is responsible for new members relative inactivity.

REASONS FOR JOINING AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF MEMBERSHIP

Although in the survey these two areas were covered by separate questions, it is more useful to discuss the findings together, because there will clearly be a degree of overlap between respondents' reasons for joining the Party and the perceived benefits which contribute to the continuance of their membership. In fact, the reasons why people choose to become and remain members of political parties is an area which has attracted a high degree of academic interest, and it will therefore be necessary to outline some of the theoretical arguments regarding this issue before going on to discuss how my own results can be reconciled with this theorising.

For some, the decision to join a political party is seen as something of a curiosity because, for most people, such a decision constitutes 'irrational' behaviour. For example, Seyd and Whiteley outline Olson's model which proposes that, because the collective benefits of a party's election to office can be enjoyed without the cost of personal participation, most people will choose to 'free ride'. Only a minority will benefit from the 'selective incentives' which a party can provide but which are inaccessible to 'free-riders', and this explains why party members tend to represent only a small minority of the general population (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, pp.56-9).

However, Seyd and Whiteley contend that such models are overly simplistic and take an excessively economic view of human behaviour. They offer an alternative 'general-incentive theory' which, while acknowledging that selective incentives are relevant influences upon the decisions of some people to become and remain party members, contends that such incentives need to be described more fully and supplemented by other kinds of incentive. Firstly, selective incentives need to be divided into process and outcome incentives, the former relating to the interest and stimulation derived from political participation in itself rather than any specific goals, the latter relating to beneficial outcomes of a private as opposed to collective nature - for example the furtherance of one's professional or political career. However, both types of selective benefit will accrue primarily to the active member, and so it is still necessary to explain why many people choose to be relatively inactive party members. (Such an explanation appears particularly relevant given the above findings regarding the comparative passivity of the newer members in my own sample.)

The key to understanding why this is so, argue Seyd and Whiteley, is through conceiving of individuals as thinking 'collectively' as well as 'individually'.

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Hence some people join the Labour Party because of their belief that members can collectively influence outcomes and hence make a difference to their own lives and those with whom they identify. The existence of this 'collective thinking' (a concept largely absent from economic accounts of behaviour) can help explain why not everyone chooses to be a political 'free-rider'. Seyd and Whiteley further identify the need to distinguish between positive and negative collective incentives, the former relating to the desire to achieve collective goals, the latter the wish to change or redress the policy goals and actions of political others (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, pp.59-63).

The authors used this general-incentives theory to categorise responses in their own 1990 survey to the question of why members joined the Labour Party. The vast majority fell into three categories:

Altruistic concerns (42%)

These relate to more abstract collective goals, often expressed as a desire to 'build socialism' or to create 'a more compassionate society', as opposed to more specific, policy-related collective goals (the latter only accounted for 8% of responses).

Selective process incentives (24%)

As outlined above, these relate to the interest and stimulation of participation in itself.

Collective negative incentives (17%)

Again as explained above, these are the desire to change the political goals or actions of others (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p.74).

There are some interesting parallels between these findings and those of my own survey. Firstly, let us examine the benefits which members felt accrued to them through their party membership. The answers given to this question were coded, and produced the results in table 8.

Table 8
What do respondents 'get out' of party membership?

	Frequency	Percentage
Contribution to Creating a Better Society	83	25.0

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Nothing/Not Much	63	19.0
Involvement	53	16.0
Sense of Belonging	32	9.6
Achievement	32	9.6
Clear Conscience etc.	30	9.0
Political Knowledge	20	6.0
Opposing Tories	18	5.4
Instrumental	1	0.2
Total Number of Respondents	332	

Exactly a quarter fell into the category 'contribution to creating a better society for all', which clearly falls within Seyd and Whiteley's 'altruistic concerns'. Further, from the description of this category which these authors give, it is also appropriate to include my 'achievement' and 'clear conscience' responses within this grouping. This gives an overall total of around 44% of my own sample who can be described as remaining within the party because of altruistic concerns - a figure very similar to that of Seyd and Whiteley's study. Similarly, if we group together my 'involvement' and 'sense of belonging' categories underneath the heading of selective process incentives, the total of 24.6% is again remarkably close to Seyd and Whiteley's total for this group of responses. However, while these authors found some 17% of respondents within the 'collective negative incentives' category, only about 5% of my own sample ('opposing Tories') can be so categorised.

It should also be noted that, surprisingly, and perhaps somewhat alarmingly for Labour, the second most popular single response (19%) came from those who felt they derived little or nothing from their membership. Further, the various positive benefits proposed by the Party's own literature - the election of candidates, consultation on policy, election activism, and participation in social and fund-raising events - are notable by their virtual or complete absence. Unlike levels of political activity, the data suggest no significant differences between new and older members in terms of the personal benefits they derive from Party membership

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Answers to the question which dealt with reasons for joining the Party were coded in a similar manner to those relating to the perceived benefits of membership, producing the results in table 9.

Table 9
Respondent's Reason for Joining Party

	Frequency	Percentage
Get Rid of Tories	83	28.1
Ideological	74	25.1
Involvement	69	23.4
Elect a Labour Govt.	34	11.5
'New Labour'/Blair	23	7.8
John Smith	9	3.1
Political Knowledge	3	1.0
Total Number of Respondents	295	

This time the category which closely corresponds to Seyd and Whiteley's 'collective negative incentives' is more clearly prioritised by respondents: the desire to remove the Conservatives from office was the most popular single response to this question. Could it be that frustration with an unpopular government reaching the end of a long period in office is a major contributory factor to the membership rises of recent years? However, if we again group ideological motivations and the desire to elect a Labour government beneath the heading of 'altruistic concerns', we find that this category is again highly significant, accounting for nearly 37% of responses. The 'involvement' category (23.4%), which corresponds to Seyd and Whiteley's 'selective process incentives', is again remarkably close to their figure and that derived from my own data relating to the benefits of membership.

With regard to the motivations of those who have joined the Party most recently, data derived from a separate analysis of new and older members showed evidence of a significant, but far from straightforward, relationship. The theory that Labour's recent recruitment success might be a primarily

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anti-Tory phenomenon receives no support - there is little difference between new and older members in this category. However, older members are substantially more likely to cite ideological reasons for joining than are their newer counterparts: 31% compared to 12%. In contrast, the two areas where the new members are over-represented are (not surprisingly) the New Labour/Blair category where the ratio of new to old is 13%:4% and the positive desire to elect a Labour government (18%: 8%). Contrary to the evidence derived from the question on policy goals, then, there is evidence here to suggest that new Labour members may be less ideological and more pragmatic than the wider membership. If we consider these results together with the substantial differences between the two categories of member regarding opinions about party reforms and centralisation of power, there seems to be clear evidence that Labour's new members are much more likely to be aligned with the modernising wing of the Party. However, the fact that even among the new members only 13% fall into the 'New Labour/ Blair' category when it comes to explaining their reasons for joining the Party suggests that, contrary to the findings of **Labour Party News**, it is not Blair's leadership which is 'overwhelmingly the single main factor spurring people to join Labour' (**New Statesman** 28 April 1995, p.28). Seyd and Whiteley's more recent 1997 survey appears to confirm this: only 15% of new members in their sample cited New Labour or Blair as their most important reason for joining.

Taken together, my data regarding the perceived benefits of membership and reasons for joining the Party suggest a very similar conclusion to that reached by Seyd and Whiteley: altruistic concerns relating to 'collective' incentives appear to be the single most important factor in the decision to become and remain a Labour Party member, closely followed by 'selective' incentives which are more closely related to individual satisfaction. It should be noted, however, that like Seyd and Whiteley's sample my own respondents are highly unlikely to admit to the more tangible and instrumental 'outcome' incentives, but instead prioritise 'process' incentives (Seyd and Whiteley 1992, p.76). It is therefore participation itself rather than any specific goals which this may help realise which is the more important influence upon the membership. The only other obviously significant factor is the desire to challenge or reverse Conservative policies.

Overall, the responses of new and older members were not hugely different, and my findings do not therefore suggest an obvious explanation for the steep rise in membership of the Labour Party in recent years. However, the contrasts which do exist between the two groups may provide some suggestion of changed motivations for becoming a Party member. Although

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'collective incentives' predominate among new and older members, the former appear much less likely to be influenced by abstract ideological or idealistic motivations and more likely to cite the more direct appeal of getting Labour into power. This, together with the fact that a relatively small but significant number of new members cited the New Labour/Blair phenomenon as their principal reason for joining, may suggest that the greater electability of the new, 'modernised' Party is a significant influence upon increased recruitment. It is true that most people like winners, and it may also be true that many more people were moved to join Labour simply because the Party under Tony Blair increasingly assumed the appearance of a winning team, an appearance confirmed by the emphatic election victory in 1997. While it may be the case that political parties in opposition are in many respects more attractive to potential activists than are those in government, it may (somewhat paradoxically) be true that a party on the verge of regaining power after a long period in opposition offers the most appealing prospect of all.

CONCLUSIONS: NEW LABOUR, FAMILIAR STORIES, OR NEW LABOUR, NEW DANGERS?

A number of continuities are apparent in the profile and attitudes of the sample. The status of new and older members in terms of class, age, gender and other social factors was broadly similar. Politically, both groups shared a preference for traditional Labour policy priorities and there was little difference in terms of political ambitions and the perceived benefits of membership. As well as these areas of apparent continuity, there were salient differences between older and newer members. New members demonstrated greater levels of support for recent reforms and were more likely to be content with the current distribution of power within the Party. They also showed substantially lower levels of trade union participation and political activity. In addition, there were some potentially revealing differences relating to reasons for joining Labour.

Taken together, what might the survey results suggest about the future of political participation within the Labour Party, both in general terms and within a more specifically Scottish context? The findings indicate that the Party may face some difficulty in sustaining its appeal to existing and prospective members. The 19% of respondents who felt they derived little or nothing from their membership may already represent a disaffected fringe who are prone to defection or resignation. In addition, Labour risks alienating a substantial proportion of its current membership, firstly because

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most members favour traditional policy goals which the Party is pursuing less vigorously than in the past, and secondly because a substantial minority (particularly among older members) are concerned about recent reforms and a perceived overcentralisation of power. However, it is also true that a clear majority of all members broadly agree with the reforming project within the Party, and that the views of the newer members on this issue and some others make them appear relatively Blairite. If such a shift in opinion represents the beginnings of a move away from more traditional Labour values, perhaps the tendency to favour more 'modernising' candidates for the new parliament - if indeed such a policy exists - can be justified to a certain extent.

However, if the above suggests that the Party would be well advised to direct its appeal toward those who have joined most recently, such a strategy might also be problematic. Although the lower levels of union affiliation which the survey revealed could be interpreted as a positive development for a leadership anxious to further loosen its links with the union movement, the weaker attachment to the labour movement as a whole which this suggests may foreshadow a more shallow approach to political participation which may not be to the Party's benefit in the long run. Such a loss of depth in engagement with the Party, which also appears to be substantiated by the comparatively low levels of political activity amongst these newer members, might suggest that Labour's newest recruits are relatively volatile in their commitment to the Party. If this was true then it would clearly be a matter of some concern, given that the capacity not just to attract but to retain members is vitally important to any aspiring party of mass membership. In fact my own data suggest that membership retention may indeed be a problem for Labour. Only around 30% of respondents joined the Party for the first time in or before 1979 (when individual membership was higher even than current figures) and of those some 40% have discontinued and renewed their membership in the intervening period, indicating a 'hard core' of fewer than one in five who have held continuous membership since Labour was last in power. A major challenge for the Party will therefore be to keep the many new members it has recently attracted, especially since it has now attained its goal of becoming the party of government and subsequently attracted criticism as the promises and idealism of opposition have often been subordinated to the responsibility and pragmatism of office.

In Scotland, these difficulties may be enhanced by the rival attraction of the SNP on the centre-left of the political spectrum and the boost which their membership may receive from the forthcoming Scottish Parliament, although Labour, as the party which placed this parliament on the statute book and the one which is perhaps most likely to dominate its composition, may also stand

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to benefit in terms of its appeal to new and existing members north of the border. Much will depend on the dynamics and the perceived success of the parliament, outcomes which are impossible to predict. These possibilities notwithstanding, the evidence which the survey offers suggests that, despite its recent recruitment success, Labour would do well not to take its future as a party of mass membership for granted.

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