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History provides masterclass in talking about social justice without scaring voters

If the Labour party conference is to succeed in reversing the party's fortunes, leaders must find a way of talking openly and positively about economic redistribution, according to a new H&P paper released today. Oxford University historian Ben Jackson argues that social justice could become a popular, mainstream policy uniting low- and middle-income voters if speechwriters draw on the language used by progressive leaders of the past.

In [How to talk about redistribution: a historical perspective](#), Ben Jackson argues that Labour's policy of 'redistribution by stealth' needs to be dragged out into the open to successfully tackle the entrenched poverty and inequality in contemporary Britain. To tackle poverty Labour must be bolder in its redistributive economic policies and find a language that will convince and not scare voters.

His paper identifies language Labour could harness, looking at Lloyd George's plans for welfare reform and progressive fiscal policy in the 1910s, Roosevelt's communication of his New Deal in 30's America, and Clement Attlee's proposals for Britain's post-war reconstruction. The paper identifies key rhetoric that Labour could draw on including:

- Clement Attlee's speech from the 1945 general election rejecting the Conservative notion that 'if every individual seeks his own interest somehow or other the interests of all will be served'.
- Lloyd George's 1909 'People's Budget' which aimed to place 'burdens on the broadest shoulders' and to ensure that 'wealth shall pay its fair share'.
- Roosevelt's call to advance the needs of the 'average man' through 'democracy in taxation'.

Dr Jackson's paper shows that progressive leaders of the past articulated and won arguments about economic redistribution by appealing to the familiar values of opportunity, security and fairness, rather than explicitly egalitarian language. Their rhetoric aimed to build a political coalition between low and middle-income voters against the super-rich. In particular, successful radical politicians of the past used a moderate discourse that appealed to national rather than class-based identity, contrasting the national interest with the sectional interests of the wealthy.

Dr Jackson said:

“The progressive politicians I’ve looked at didn’t preach a leftist fundamentalism to the working classes; in fact they mobilised widespread popular support by showing that the vested interests of the wealthy conflicted with the needs of the ‘average citizen’. They argued that a fair and democratic society should ensure security and opportunity for all, and should take collective responsibility for economic hardship, a message that is as relevant today as it was then.”

Notes to editors

1. Ben Jackson’s paper, *How to talk about redistribution: a historical perspective* is published today on the [History & Policy website](#).
2. Ben Jackson is University Lecturer and Tutorial Fellow in Modern History at University College, Oxford. He is the author of *Equality and the British Left* (2007) and is currently working on the intellectual history of neo-liberalism. This paper draws on his 'The rhetoric of redistribution', in J. Callaghan, N. Fishman, B. Jackson and M. McIvor (eds), *In Search of Social Democracy* (forthcoming, 2008). benjamin.jackson@univ.ox.ac.uk.
3. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
4. For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact: Ruth Evans, History & Policy, tel: 020 7862 8768 email: ruth.evans@sas.ac.uk.