

‘The Land with the Midas Touch’: British Perceptions of New Zealand, 1935-1979

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Abstract

For many British commentators, especially on the social democratic left, mid-century New Zealand, or at least its ‘settler’ population, was a society with much to admire – particularly in the field of social policy. British Labour Party leaders looked enviously at, for example, the Dominion’s 1938 Social Security Act, legislation which significantly added to the provision of state-backed health care and social security for New Zealanders. This was seen as building on earlier reforms which had established New Zealand’s reputation as a ‘social laboratory’, a key component of the Dominion’s sense of identity. In addition, the very fact of its Commonwealth membership made the potential transfer of its practices to the ‘motherland’ all the more viable. New Zealand was thus a key participant in the transnational exchange of ideas about social welfare which characterized the era. But after the Second World War doubts began to spread, both inside and outside of New Zealand. These were focused on, for instance, a purportedly ossified political system and concerns over the absence of a broadly-based intellectual culture. From being a ‘social laboratory’ which could be fruitfully emulated, New Zealand became an example of a society in which a lack of vision and foresight could prove highly problematic.

Keywords

New Zealand; Transnationalism; Governance; Socialism; Policy learning.

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‘Practical colonists’: New Zealand’s long history as exemplar

This article examines, first and foremost, the ways in which ideas about social reform and its practice in mid twentieth century New Zealand were adopted or adapted by British proponents of more ‘advanced’ social legislation. Building on the example of the country’s Liberal administrations in the early part of the twentieth century, the Dominion’s first Labour government, elected in 1935, proved instructive to the Labour Party in Britain, in the mid-1930s an organization with little immediate hope of a return to government. Admiration became tempered in the post-war era, however, as an increasing perception developed, not least among academics and commentators both outside and inside New Zealand, that the country’s society had ‘stalled’ and that its historic role as a ‘social laboratory’ was in doubt. It is worth stressing too that, even when British perceptions were at their most positive, British commentators were for the most part concerned with the ‘settler’ population.

The practical relationship between Britain and New Zealand had also begun to change by the 1960s with, on the one hand, the Dominion becoming more oriented to its Pacific neighbours and, on the other, Britain shedding Commonwealth links in search of closer European integration. As David Capie notes, although the bonds between the two countries were strong in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, nonetheless there was, for New Zealand, a ‘postwar shift from a Commonwealth to an American-led security order’. Throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, furthermore, there was an international shift in patterns of foreign investment, with the USA and Australia replacing London as a source of investment capital. Even more importantly, British demand for New Zealand agricultural produce markedly declined.¹ Although New Zealand was again to play a role as exemplar by being

among the first countries radically to downsize its welfare ambitions from 1984, and with both societies continuing to pay attention to each other's social policy reforms, by this time the close association between Britain and its previously closest Commonwealth ally had all but disappeared.²

Perceptions of New Zealand were, until the mid-twentieth century, almost entirely benign. Miles Fairburn made clear in *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* both the reasons for New Zealand's 'arcadian image' abroad, and the wide appeal of a land that in the nineteenth century seemed to offer both high wages and a peaceful refuge from the increasingly fraught labour relations prevailing in Europe. New Zealand was constantly depicted as a land of healthy climate and natural abundance; of wide-open spaces; plentiful land and labour shortages, boosting wages: in short, a country lacking in the acute status anxiety and class divides that were poisoning European politics. Employers and labourers were thought moderate in their demands; governance strong; crime low. The *New Zealand Handbook* of 1888 promised workers 'a comfortable living, a house in healthy surroundings, a fair start for their children, and a reasonable provision for their own future'.³ These were influential tropes. Many British journalists, politicians, civil servants and academics continued to visit and praise the country between the mid-1930s and the late 1970s, as indeed they had for several decades previously. By so doing they continuously mounted imaginative re-constructions of a country promoted by its elites as 'God's Own Country' and a 'land of eternal spring', at least initially serving as a desirable model for social change back in the United Kingdom.⁴

Here we will chart the course of this traffic in policy-orientated ideas, paying close attention to what D.T. Rodgers has termed the 'narratives and social fictions' that help determine why some policies make it across borders, and some do not.⁵ Such work has a venerable pedigree, for historians have long noted how New Zealand was often seen as a

‘social laboratory’ in late nineteenth-century Britain.⁶ And as Marian Sawer has shown, in the era before the First World War reform-minded governments in New Zealand, Australia, and Britain drew on a ‘common fund of social research and policy discourse’. This enabled these administrations to utilize ‘successful precedents’ from elsewhere, and especially from within the British Empire. In turn, this ‘helped reduce the risk of such reform, both for the public and for the proponents’.⁷ Peter Coleman has further shown that New Zealand’s social policies had a significant impact in the USA.⁸

One embodiment of New Zealand’s manifold influence in the outside world was the country’s Agent-General in Britain, William Pember Reeves. As Tony Ballantyne has pointed out, Reeves’ cultured nationalism helped to create one part of New Zealand’s dominant national image abroad: of a ‘progressive’, stable, orderly country of settlers which had brought its racial conflicts between Europeans and Maori to an end.⁹ Giselle Byrnes has observed that Reeves’ 1898 book, *Aotearoa: Long White Cloud*, marked a shift in ‘perspective and style’ in New Zealand history emphasizing, *inter alia*, the colony’s leading role in ‘women’s suffrage, labour emancipation and social innovation’.¹⁰ Pember Reeves served as a reforming Liberal minister before moving to London. There he became a leading Fabian and close associate of Sidney and Beatrice Webb before becoming Director of the London School of Economics. In the latter post he preceded another ‘progressive’ social reformer with a pronounced interest in New Zealand’s welfare policy, William Beveridge. Beveridge was to visit the Dominion in 1948 when, as Margaret Tennant notes, he was ‘honoured as the father of Britain’s welfare state’. In the course of this visit Beveridge stressed the importance of voluntarism in welfare provision and, as Tennant further remarks, his ideas were ‘subsequently mediated by at least one prominent public servant, John Robson, who used public resources to encourage voluntary bodies to experiment in areas where the state had to tread warily, if at all’.¹¹ New Zealand’s influence was not, furthermore, confined

to Pember Reeves' work. British women's suffrage campaigners often cited New Zealand as a model of democratic progress after it became the first state to include women in the franchise at the start of Richard Seddon's long Liberal Premiership between 1893 and 1906. Kate Shepherd, the New Zealand suffrage campaign's leader, toured Britain in 1894-95, 1903 and 1908 – causing Quaker activist Mary Priestman to argue that 'scarcely anything does more good to women's suffrage in England than seeing those who speak from personal experience'.¹²

Many of these ideas became an international intellectual currency, criss-crossing oceans and continents.¹³ In Britain New Zealand was perceived as an exemplar of peaceful and ordered progress – still a highly problematical, and deeply questionable view of its exceptionalism that ignored the way in which Australian, British and American culture and presumptions all helped to shape New Zealand's Pākehā (that is, European) society. In the second half of the twentieth century New Zealanders generally watched American films and listened to American radio shows and took many of their more progressive educational ideas from the same source.¹⁴ Much of New Zealand's political language itself naturally came from the United Kingdom, but other additions – for instance the idea of a party 'caucus' – were imported from the USA.¹⁵ This multi-dimensional traffic in ideas extended to legislation. The country's Physical Welfare and Recreation Act, passed in 1937, both followed on from and mirrored very similar British legislation of just a few months before.¹⁶

It was as usual for the colonies to copy (or reject) British institutions and plans as it was for policy exchange to happen in the other direction: Tennant's detailed history of voluntary organizations in New Zealand admirably demonstrates just how deep and long-lasting was the influence of the metropolitan, and then the ex-colonial, power. A new European settlement, with less philanthropic endowment and activity than Britain enjoyed, felt the conscious need to set up stronger regulations in deliberate contradistinction to

Britain's, for instance in the care of children under the Infant Life Protection Acts of 1893 and 1896. In many such sectors, such as social work, prison reform and marriage guidance, New Zealand's policies were often very deeply influenced by the British example.¹⁷

New Zealand was often evoked within British policy discourse, negatively as well as positively – a dominance it enjoyed in part because it seemed to offer a complete case study of social progress with easy-to-summate explanations immediately provided by its history and political provenance. New Zealand's influence on policy development has hardly gone unheeded – indeed Andrew Dilley has recently pointed out how important the country was in Australian Labor's adoption of a graduated land tax, and its passage into law in 1910.¹⁸ Here we seek to cast new light on the scale and scope of New Zealand's influence on welfare policy – both more specifically in the UK, and rather later in the development of relations between the two countries, than has usually been addressed by previous historians.

Such reverberations have not been too hard to find. The British-born American social scientist Leslie Lipson, who served as the first Professor of Political Science at Victoria University of Wellington between 1939 and 1946, noted wryly in 1948 that the claim that New Zealand 'leads the world' had been widespread since at least the 1890s.¹⁹ It was a colony, and then a state, often thought of as having been 'born modern' – created at the very end of European colonization, and sited geographically at the limits of Europeans' political reach, it was a place where the previous economic and social mistakes made in Europe itself, and in the Americas, had not been repeated.²⁰ The country was, in the words of *New Zealand Herald* editor and radical imperialist William Lane, a 'better Britain', perceived as taking the best racial stock and ideas from the metropole and planting them in more fertile soil.²¹ This idea of a 'better Britain' built on Charles Dilke's mid-nineteenth century notion of a 'Greater Britain'; an idea that had a long shelf-life.²² It was also to be crucial in the acceptance of New Zealand's approach to social reform by British sympathizers.

‘An act of faith’: the programmatic welfare state?

One of New Zealand’s hallmarks had always been the perception that it enjoyed a wide measure of social equality. Many mid-century British commentators agreed. Future Labour Chancellor Hugh Dalton, who visited Australia and New Zealand in 1938, recorded in his diary: ‘How much more worth defending are these sunny, healthy British democracies in the South Pacific than the Counting Houses of the City of London, or the Snob Home Counties, or the Slums of Glasgow’.²³ Dalton elaborated further in the notes for his diary where he argued that Australians’ and New Zealanders’ good health was attributable to ‘the high standard of living and the absence of mass poverty which disfigures older lands’.²⁴ This contrast between the ‘new’ and ‘younger’ countries and the older and more class-bound mother country was a recurring theme, playing as it did into the notion that New Zealand was a ‘better Britain’ while the motherland was beset with problems.

As economic depression gripped the capitalist economies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, New Zealand’s welfare system, both voluntary and state, continued to speak to the rest of the world. In 1930 the mayor of Wellington claimed that, along with the All Blacks and the country’s military, the internationally renowned voluntary infant welfare organization, the Plunket Society, had ‘advertised’ the Dominion.²⁵ In 1938, New Zealand’s Social Security Act became one of the most-examined pieces of legislation in the world.²⁶ But it was a measure that came as no surprise to policymakers aware of the Dominion’s path-breaking efforts. In return for a special tax on all incomes, non-means tested pensions for the over-65s, universal health care, family allowances and sickness benefits were set up which many New Zealanders believed, reasonably enough, to be the envy of the world. Though means testing

remained for younger pensioners, and on most other allowances, they were not particularly fiercely applied.²⁷

The Social Security Act stood, for many years, as the acme of progressive generosity. David Goldblatt, a longstanding British Liberal Party campaigner and candidate, visited New Zealand in 1955, returning on several subsequent occasions, and published a short but revealing survey of the Dominion in 1957.²⁸ His impressions were, at least superficially, extremely positive. The Dominion was, for Goldblatt, the ‘Land with the Midas Touch’ which could be seen as “‘Merrie England’ with electricity’. New Zealand had led the world in combatting poverty and was forever expanding its social security provision.²⁹ Alongside the Pensions Amendment Act which increased state pensions (especially for widows), it was Social Security that burnished New Zealand’s image as a practical utopia. Goldblatt argued that the scheme, ‘in its spirit of human kindness’, showed precisely the ‘the generosity and sense of communal decency that are the pride and mark of New Zealand’. As such it demonstrated a commitment to the country’s ‘resources, wealth, determination and future’, defined in terms of its human capital. Long before Lyndon Johnson employed the phrase in 1960s America, here was ‘a declaration of war against want and poverty’ and an expression of social solidarity and social responsibility. Goldblatt saw New Zealand’s Social Security system as an example of how blessed the country really was: a ‘thanksgiving’ for the happy life in ‘God’s Own Country’.³⁰

The Act’s social security and health provisions were closely studied by the British Labour Party and provided crucial ammunition in its case for social reconstruction. As Stephen Brooke has argued, when in the early 1940s Labour was preparing its welfare proposals for post-war Britain, and doing so ahead of Beveridge, ‘one of the models’ for a universal and comprehensive scheme of social insurance was ‘New Zealand’s Social Security Act of 1938’.³¹ Equally, the struggle between New Zealand’s Labour government and the

Dominion's branch of the British Medical Association was followed carefully by both medical leaders in Britain and that country's Labour Party, and prefigured the conflict attending the post-war Labour government's introduction of the National Health Service (NHS).³² The Minister of Health in the post-war Labour government, Aneurin Bevan, was later to recall the 'collective arrogance' displayed by the medical profession in Britain, New Zealand, and Australia.³³ In 1944 – and so at the height of debates over post-war 'reconstruction' – the British Labour Party published a pamphlet by the 1930s New Zealand Finance Minister, and later Prime Minister, Walter Nash, revealingly entitled *Social Progress*. He argued that taken together, old age, widows', family and maternity benefits constituted a guide to a very Labourist philosophy. For here, in this scheme of social security, was recognition that 'the first charge on a nation's wealth should be the care of the old, the young, and the ailing'. National resources should be organized to 'ensure the maximum production of useful goods and services and their availability to all. Collective planning is essential'.³⁴ Martyn Finlay, in the 1970s to become Labour's Attorney General, wrote similarly in 1943 that collectively national superannuation, accident and health benefits were a rebuttal of fascism itself: 'Hitler fashioned a highly effective machine on the principle of Guns *or* Butter. Social Security aims at maintaining the family and improving its living conditions. Through it we can do a far better job, on the principle of Homes – *and* Butter'.³⁵

It is worth emphasizing that interest in the New Zealand Labour government's social reforms was not simply confined to Britain's labour movement. In 1937 Nash had written a piece for the New Fabian Research Bureau on 'Labour Rule in New Zealand'. But this also appeared at the same time in *The New Outlook*, the journal of the Next Five Years Group, a more broadly-based body representing generally 'progressive' opinion and part of the 1930s vogue for 'planning'.³⁶ Here Nash outlined his government's achievements after its first year in office: concluding, and in a reference to contemporary international tensions, he suggested

that ‘collective security’ was as ‘imperative for individuals as for nations’. In a further gesture to New Zealand’s pioneering social welfare system he claimed that once the Dominion had put ‘our own house in order’ it could then help ‘to raise the standard of living in all countries’.³⁷

Indeed, the 1938 Act found supporters in Britain from all parts of the political spectrum – though Labour politicians seemed to assume rather than promote the example. During the debates on the Beveridge Report Lord Bledisloe, Conservative peer and former Governor General of New Zealand, observed that while some of his fellow peers viewed the Dominion ‘with suspicion’ they would be well-advised to look at its recently inaugurated social security system. Bledisloe’s own, rather unusual, take on this was that the scheme ‘made it perfectly clear’ that New Zealanders would not ‘tolerate idleness on the part of anyone, to whatever class of the community he might belong’.³⁸ In the Commons, meanwhile, the eccentric Independent MP Denis Kendall suggested he and his constituents, irrespective of political opinion, had accepted that reform of social insurance was required. He also reported that it had been said that ‘if New Zealand, one of our smallest Dominions, can have a scheme of social security, this country, which is the heart and hub of the Empire, should be well able to afford such a scheme’.³⁹

A peculiar, particular mix of intervention and self-reliance was often thought to emanate from New Zealand’s very history. As an isolated farming society, the country was said to attract the hard-working and the self-reliant. An early twentieth century school textbook rendered the point thus: ‘the successful colonist must be of sturdy character, preserving, unflinching in the face of difficulty, steady of nerve... and not too proud to labour with his own hands; he must love the land, as the old Teuton forefathers of the English loved it’.⁴⁰ New Zealand emerged into national consciousness, and then statehood, in an era when the balance between the individual and the reforming state was a matter of intense debate,

and its citizens were acutely aware of how governments might facilitate both economic growth and any social gains this might secure. Goldblatt combined both these arguments, suggesting that in New Zealand the welfare state was ‘the modern extension of its previous way of life’. It emerged from the process whereby ‘the settlement had drawn upon its resources, first in family, and then in community, to shield its less fortunate’. This approach ‘needed no theory as mainspring, for it grew out of circumstance and environment’. Older colonies had been founded by those fleeing religious or political persecution, but migrants came to New Zealand seeking a materially better life through hard work and long-term investment. ‘Private endeavour’ there took place in ‘the context of communal knowledge and consent’; an assessment that along with most other British observers ignored the dispossession of Māori. Economic improvement was in Goldblatt’s view both an individual and communal aim: hence social reform was ‘in everyone’s mind; the Welfare State was in embryo’.⁴¹

‘Blazing new trails’: Labour’s New Zealand breakthrough, 1935-1949

Welcoming the election of the first Labour government in New Zealand, the journal of one of Britain’s most powerful trades unions, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), saw it as ‘a clear mandate to the [British] Labour Party to proceed with its plans for economic reconstruction and social justice’. Reiterating a persistent theme, it suggested that Labour’s victory in New Zealand was a ‘splendid example from a young country to an old, of the translation into political action of the corporate impulse towards a new social order’.⁴² In 1938 the New Zealand government’s London office supplied the British Labour Party’s International Department with details of the 1938 Social Security Act, then before the Dominion’s parliament, and a copy of the budget. These had been specifically requested by

the International Department.⁴³ Dalton, in an article on his trip, noted that ‘in politics New Zealand is pioneering again’. Having led the world in women’s suffrage, old age pensions, and industrial arbitration the country was now ‘blazing new trails’ through, for example, a ‘Pensions and Health Scheme more generous in its benefits than any in the world’.⁴⁴

Ernest Bevin, Britain’s leading trades unionist and head of the TGWU, also visited New Zealand in 1938 where, according to his biographer, the labour movement gave him ‘a great reception’. Bevin later recounted the trip in his union’s journal, describing the New Zealand government’s social security proposals as ‘the boldest that any country of that size has ever undertaken’. As such it deserved ‘all the support we can possibly give it in this country’.⁴⁵ Bevin consequently deprecated the hostility of British business and finance to the Dominion’s currency policy, not least because this could be ‘injurious to the maintenance of the Commonwealth’.⁴⁶ Such was his commitment that he invested £110,000 of his union’s funds when New Zealand’s stocks fell in the wake of Labour’s 1938 election victory, in part because of UK financial policy.⁴⁷ And around the same time Douglas Jay, one of the Labour Party’s earliest converts to Keynesianism, saw New Zealand as one of those ‘civilized countries’ which had ‘established State control over their central banks in the last few years’. Like Scandinavia and Australia, the Dominion had also undertaken more redistribution of wealth with ‘very great success’, for example through the imposition of ‘large increases in taxation on unearned income and inheritance’ at the same point at which it had nationalized its central bank and reduced working hours. All this had occurred, Jay claimed, at no cost to economic recovery.⁴⁸

Of course, there were other viewpoints. The UK High Commissioner to New Zealand, Sir Harry Batterbee, told his superiors in London in 1939 that the relationship between the Dominion’s main political parties was at such a low point that it posed a danger to the country, and that the ‘same bitterness’ existed between the Labour Party and the ‘professional

and commercial classes'.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, as discussions around plans for post-war reconstruction got underway in the early 1940s, New Zealand was again a frequently cited example of what could be achieved by a Labour administration. The Labour economist Evan Durbin argued that the New Zealand government was among those seeking to replace *laissez-faire* capitalism with 'institutions guaranteeing a central control of industry and broad measure of social equality'.⁵⁰ Future British Cabinet Minister John Strachey, meanwhile, wrote in 1940 that, like the Swedish Social Democrats, New Zealand Labour had reconciled full employment with increased living standards, and that this gave them 'their superior position'.⁵¹ A Labour Party discussion document produced partly for post-war planning in 1942 noted that New Zealand's 1938 Act 'applies to every inhabitant of New Zealand without distinction of age, sex or occupation' and that it was in these terms, as well as in terms of content, 'a bold and constructive Act'.⁵²

The welfare reforms inaugurated by New Zealand Labour in power were in the first half of the twentieth century thought to be the country's most specific and important characteristic. New Zealand Labour leaders were convinced that these reforms deserved such general significance. In a work published during the Second World War Nash entitled one Chapter 'Why We Fight'. The war, he insisted, must be fought 'for positive ends'. Despite the hardships experienced by the Dominion's military, every soldier had experienced 'good schooling, ample work' and the confident expectation of 'a fair share of the goods produced by that work' in his country. He had also enjoyed 'a social security system guaranteeing to every citizen freedom from both the fact and fear of poverty, old age, ill health, and the other fears of insecurity which haunt the ordinary man and woman almost every day'. Consequently, New Zealand's fighting men had before them 'the vision of better things to come'. Pressing the point home, Nash stressed the importance of self-help in New Zealand society. But that did not mean that social obligations were neglected – on the contrary. The

principles which guided New Zealand society had been incorporated in legislation, ‘in what is called the Social Security Act’. The government realised ‘more completely, perhaps, than has been recognized anywhere else, the need for the community, as a whole, to accept responsibility directly for the economic welfare of its members, that against the hazards incidental to the competitive struggle for private gain must be set the need for collective organization of security’. The outcome of the war, then, should be a ‘people’s peace’ which must be a ‘battle for an all-in security for all’.⁵³ This was not a matter of Nash simply talking to his fellow New Zealanders, for the work was published in both the USA and Britain. Like others, he was drawing attention to the Dominion’s role in promoting social reform. In forming his ideas Nash and others in the Labour party drew heavily on ‘Hobson, Keynes and other English Liberals’ and Nash brought with him, from his native English Midlands, a strong sense of Christian Socialism.⁵⁴

Even with Labour out of office in New Zealand after 1949, the Dominion continued to attract the attention of British commentators. In 1951, British Labour was highly critical of what happened after the National Party’s election victory in New Zealand. Policies directly affecting ordinary New Zealanders included the removal of food subsidies and price controls, with consequent price rises for foodstuffs such as bread and tea.⁵⁵ The Fabian political theorist G.D.H. Cole drew especial attention to New Zealand’s rising birth rate, and declining death rate, when he reviewed the British welfare state in 1956 – developments in his view that reflected unfavourably on Britain’s poor record in both areas.⁵⁶ One general guide to the country, published in the later 1960s, remarked on ‘the most comprehensive welfare system to be found anywhere in the world at that time...unique in the range of the benefits it provided and for the sweeping powers of paternalism which it took to itself’. Inflation was the main problem that such a small and isolated country might face under conditions of full

employment and relatively high benefits: this was soaked up, in the approved Keynesian manner, via high personal taxation.⁵⁷

The New Zealand-born Stanford economist John Bell Condliffe reflected on his country's recent history in his 1959 book *The Welfare State in New Zealand*, written after a 1957 visit to his native land. Making the familiar point about New Zealanders' purported pragmatism, he suggested that if they had 'any dominant theory of social and economic organization, it is that economic prosperity must rest upon and promote human welfare'. Condliffe, again oblivious to New Zealand's politics of dispossession, believed that this concept originated with the first settlers, rejecting the dominance of both Tory paternalism and the inception of *laissez-faire* occurring in Britain at the time New Zealand came into being as a consciously separate entity. A lack of long-established voluntary bodies had necessitated state action against poverty, particularly in the economic crises of the 1890s and 1930s. This 'well-governed and law-abiding community', moreover, trusted its governors and courts enough to feel loyal to their decisions.⁵⁸

Socialism or Labourism?

For many years, most in the British Labour movement had no doubt that socialism was being introduced in New Zealand. So, for instance, a 1937 Labour Party pamphlet, *New Zealand's Progress Under Socialism*, observed that plans were in place for 'comprehensive health insurance, unemployment insurance and national superannuation schemes to cover every citizen of the Dominion'.⁵⁹ Noting the New Zealand party's re-election in 1938, the TGWU's journal remarked (under the headline 'A Great Victory for Socialism') that the result was a 'vote of confidence in Socialist administration and a mandate for a new instalment of bold

Socialist planning'. It was thereby 'a lesson to the British people that prosperity can only be achieved by fundamental economic reconstruction'.⁶⁰

Dalton, writing of his 1938 trip, suggested that New Zealand's government was currently 'proving that Socialism and Social Reform are not alternative but complementary policies' and in so doing were showing that 'democracy, competently handled, can deliver the goods'. In addition, in iron and steel production, it was 'creating a brand new Socialist industry'.⁶¹ Labour leader Clement Attlee, meanwhile, wrote in 1937 that within the last year there had taken place 'the most interesting development in constitutional Socialism that we have yet seen'. He then outlined the various measures undertaken or planned by the New Zealand government, concluding that by the end of its first period of office the Dominion should be 'well on the road to Socialism, without a vestige of dictatorship and with full democratic rights preserved'.⁶² And two years later, as some British financial institutions sought to curtail New Zealand's expansive monetary policy, the City editor of the left-wing journal *Tribune* headlined an article: 'Socialism Has Won in New Zealand: That is Why the City Plans a "Murder"'.⁶³

Beatrice Webb too was, initially at least, convinced that socialism was being built in New Zealand. In 1937 she recorded of her visitor Walter Nash that he was 'finance minister in the first all-socialist government of New Zealand'. Two years later, Nash called again and Webb noted that, like the Scandinavian countries, New Zealand was 'developing successfully, on the Fabian socialist principles of the inevitability of gradualness'. But without working the point through fully, she also observed that capitalists and landlords had been 'swept on one side so far as political leadership is concerned'. The question of whether this actually constituted 'socialism' was one which would be brought to her attention in the near future. During the course of a conversation with her nephew in 1941, Webb suggested that New Zealand was 'one of the only dominions to be democratic in her treatment of the

natives and also socialist in her internal organisation'. But her younger relative objected that in fact there 'was very little socialism in New Zealand'. The Dominion, he acknowledged, had extensive social services. These were funded, however, 'not by socialist ownership of the means of production, but in taxation of the landlord and the capitalist'. Both were left to continue receiving rents and making profits in industry and agriculture'. To which Webb's terse response was: 'which is true'.⁶⁴ It was an argument that prefigured the debates around Croslandite revisionism and Harold Wilson's emphasis on promoting new means of production by nearly two decades.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, others continued to see the New Zealand's Labour government as being in the process of creating a new society. The Fabian Joan Simeon Clarke, heavily involved in Labour's social reconstruction planning, described the Dominion's social policies in highly favourable terms in 1942. She contrasted, for instance, the French and Belgian family allowance schemes, which had been formulated with industry and were thus viewed with suspicion, with that of 'New Zealand, a modern Socialist State' where 'children's allowances are paid to children in right of childhood and of citizenship'.⁶⁶ It was not only Labour's own progress that seemed foreshadowed in the South Pacific: divides between socialist planners and social democrats were also clearly present, if in embryonic form. This was signaled in a particularly stark manner by the left-wing Labour intellectual and future Cabinet Minister Richard Crossman who wrote, in 1953 and thus after both British and New Zealand Labour's exit from office, that British socialists had 'seen, in Australia and New Zealand, what happens to labour parties which dispense with socialism'.⁶⁷

‘The Old World and the New Society’: Labour and the Commonwealth

The transmission and acceptance of social welfare thinking from New Zealand to Britain was, as noted, strongly reinforced by contemporary views about Empire and Commonwealth. As Stefan Berger suggests, the Labour Party had during the imperial era ‘strong personal links to labour movements in the colonies, in particular to those of white settler societies’. So for instance Hugh Gaitskell, a rising star in the 1940s and soon to be Chancellor, ‘felt much closer to the Commonwealth countries than to continental European socialism’.⁶⁸ This was also true of already-established figures such as Attlee, Bevin and Dalton. Dalton recorded that he had not only met with leading Labour figures during his visit in the late 1930s but had also ‘brought away a large quantity of official reports and political literature, and arranged for an improved scheme of interchange of documents and information between the British and New Zealand Labour Parties’.⁶⁹ Dalton was also keen that the Dominions be fully apprised of the contemporary European situation and that their foreign policies should take this into account. He noted approvingly the robust line taken by Bill Jordan, New Zealand High Commissioner in London and his country’s representative on the Council of the League of Nations, over crises in China, Spain, and Ethiopia. And whatever government was in power, Dalton continued, New Zealand was ‘more ready than any other Dominion to help (Britain) if war comes’: he approvingly quoted Nash to this effect.⁷⁰

Bevin, later Labour’s Foreign Secretary, was likewise committed to the Commonwealth and especially to countries such as Australia and New Zealand because of their reform programmes. In an address at Chatham House, the foreign policy research centre, on his impressions of the 1938 British Commonwealth Relations Conference Bevin raised the issue of ‘social progress’. Here he allowed that ‘tremendous differences of standard exist’ but still argued that in ‘Australia and New Zealand great progress has been made in

social services'.⁷¹ Early in 1939, a sub-committee of Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) received a letter from James Walker MP noting that he and Bevin, at a meeting with Labor colleagues in Australia, had suggested a conference of Commonwealth Labour Parties to be held in New Zealand in 1940 which would coincide with that country's centenary celebrations. The idea was subsequently endorsed by the NEC, although of course the outbreak of war stalled these plans.⁷² During the war itself, Labour's 1942 proposals for the post-war settlement noted approvingly that 'our self-governing Dominions have already proved supremely how much more unbreakable are the links of freedom than the chains of slavery'.⁷³ The title of this document, *The Old World and the New Society*, has strong echoes of comments such as those by Dalton on the contrast between Britain and its Pacific dominions, and indeed he played a prominent part in the origins of this statement.⁷⁴

Shortly afterwards a meeting of Commonwealth Labour Parties, held in London in September 1944, commented that in every Commonwealth country the labour movement was making advances. Note too was made of the 'important achievements of the Labour Governments in New Zealand and Australia' in the broader context of the construction of a 'new democratic world order'.⁷⁵ Commenting on the meeting a few years later, G.D.H. Cole noted that it had been attended by representatives from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa and that, with victory in the war 'well in sight', delegates had pointed to 'the great opportunities' for the labour movement both in countries already liberated and for 'the Movements in the British Commonwealth'. Cole placed this in the context not only of foreign affairs but also that of British Labour's plans for post-war reconstruction.⁷⁶

Attlee, in his famously reticent autobiography, spoke warmly of leading Commonwealth figures including Peter Fraser, Prime Minister of New Zealand between 1940 and 1949. The two had worked together in the Independent Labour Party prior to Fraser's departure for New Zealand where he 'had come up the hard way'. A man apparently after

Attlee's own heart, Fraser had 'plenty of courage' and was 'always ready to do all he could to help the old country'. His idealism 'was tempered by realism' and he had 'earned the affection and respect of his political opponents as well as of his supporters'.⁷⁷ Attlee, while in government, did not hesitate to force New Zealand to write off some of Britain's debts, restrict its dollar imports or indeed to devalue along with the UK in September 1949.⁷⁸ But the idea of a social or policy partnership still continued to draw the two countries together.

Around the same time, Rita Hinden, the Fabian and Labour Party authority on Commonwealth affairs, stressed the notion of 'The Commonwealth Idea' which in essence involved the 'free association of peoples', something which been formalized by way of Dominion status.⁷⁹ Attlee invoked this idea in a speech in 1957. He described the emergence of the 'white' Dominions, contrasting the situation in New Zealand, 'the most remarkable example of the absence of colour prejudice in the world', with the situation in South Africa. Speaking of the voluntary nature of the Commonwealth, he clearly endorsed Fraser's observation that Commonwealth membership was 'independence plus, not independence minus'.⁸⁰ Much of the perceived commonality between Britain and Dominions such as New Zealand, we argue, arose because of shared attitudes towards social issues and welfare reform and the willingness, on both sides, to learn from the other.

'A cold partisanship': the political consequences of New Zealand's progress

More critical views of New Zealand's social reforms gradually emerged, especially after the Second World War. New Zealand's economy was very narrowly focused on farming, as its vulnerability to Britain's entry into the European Economic Community demonstrated. Britain's High Commissioner, Sir Francis Cumming-Bruce, noted in 1961: 'New Zealand is still in essence a large farm supplying mainly the United Kingdom market, and a threat to this

market sends the whole country instinctively to panic stations'.⁸¹ New Zealand's rurally-based economy was matched by a perceived monochrome monotony in public life. There was no doubt that New Zealand was an extremely developed democracy with a high degree of personal freedom: contemporary indices of 'democratic performance' judged it very favourably. But some still perceived the Dominion as politically dull and uninspiring – even while its reforming social efforts drew praise – characterized by a practical, non-partisan sterility that was very similar to that mobilized when analysing the country's intellectual life.⁸²

New Zealand politics could appear stiflingly consensual, with little apparent difference between the main parties. One study of the 1960 General Election, by a team of political scientists from the Universities of Auckland and Otago, explained this narrow range of politics as a consequence of New Zealand's short history. The National Party, while broadly on the political right, had few long-established institutions to defend, and was deeply indebted to consensual modes of governance and social protection alike. Labour's demands, meanwhile, had been largely met as an emergency response to the crisis of the 1930s. Both parties seemed to offer a different mix of price controls, export support and industrial peace, helping to account for very high rates of voter turnout due to 'the somewhat practical nature of New Zealand politics'.⁸³

State institutions often seemed ill-equipped to meet new challenges. Lipson thought that such a directed, intimate and interconnected democracy presented its own demands: 'centralization has proceeded apace and without appreciable hindrance... the central government employs an administrative system and adheres to a departmental structure that are outmoded in many vital respects'. Meanwhile, however, 'Ministers personally intervene far too much in the details of administration'.⁸⁴ He characterized New Zealand's institutions as natural for a small and new state, 'a mechanism powerfully built and streamlined in design

to execute the people's will', without an executive head of state or a strong upper house of the legislature to restrain the government (New Zealand's Legislative Council was actually abolished in 1950). The fact that elections every three years attracted turnouts of over ninety per cent suggested that New Zealanders saw the state as an extension of themselves: 'when it acts, they feel that they are acting'. The state itself appeared like 'a utilitarian instrument for effecting their will'. Political controversy and upheaval seemed alien.⁸⁵

Austin Mitchell, later a British Labour MP but between 1959 and 1963 a history lecturer at the University of Otago, predicted in his 1969 survey of the country that such stasis would prove very costly. 'New Zealand', he wrote, was 'neither the nearest approach to the perfection of direct democracy nor a land without problems'. The latter might be less pressing than in some other countries, but they existed nonetheless and derived from the country being 'the world's most stable democracy' which made it difficult to embrace change. The inter-war Labour Party had a defined programme and a sense of where it wanted to go, but more recent difficulties had been met, Mitchell concluded, in a 'haphazard and uncoordinated way'. Those societies which had successfully faced the demands of the 1960s had 'a sense of purpose and direction'. Even in Britain's 'floundering response to current difficulties' some new ideas could be discerned. New Zealand, by contrast, was drifting aimlessly and 'threatened with being left behind in an increasingly competitive and unfamiliar world. Worse: it is threatened with not realizing that this is going on'.⁸⁶

From a slightly different angle, Goldblatt argued that in New Zealand 'the nice arguments of the Latin races give way to a cold partisanship evinced only at the polling booth' – that the 'hot' or 'passionate' politics of continental Europe, and the great class *blocs* of British politics, had been superseded in New Zealand by managerial inertia. There might be occasional protests between elections, but these were 'without vehemence'. Parliament went through the necessary motions with government proposing measures and the opposition

criticizing but ‘eventually a compromise... evolved’. When a crisis occurred it was dealt with rapidly, effectively, and generally without controversy. But all this, Goldblatt felt, held back self-expression and policy innovation. Politics was essentially parochial and on both sides expediency triumphed over ‘individual self-expression. Philosophy is drowned in a flood of policy, personality submerged in well-being’.⁸⁷

Lipson, meanwhile, had fears about both undesirable conventionality, and a lack of constitutional checks and balances on state power. Individualism was limited enough by what he saw as New Zealand’s lack of emphasis on talent and effort, draining away citizens’ desire to display their full talents – a theme he took up in his classic 1948 work *The Politics of Equality*. Related to this conformity, and to some extent its corollary, was the fact that for Lipson New Zealand’s state apparatus was like a ‘high-powered automobile with a chauffeur in the driving seat and the owners sitting behind. Once the car has gathered pace, the owners’ safety depends upon the chauffeur’s skill. Democracy’s problem is to ensure that the chauffeur will follow orders from the back seat’.⁸⁸ Until the introduction of the Parliamentary Commissioner of Administration or ‘Ombudsman’ by the new National Government in 1962, the wide discretionary powers of Ministers and administrative tribunals were subject to little constraint, particularly as it was very hard to obstruct them in the courts.⁸⁹

The appointment of an Ombudsman is a good example of the two-way traffic in ideas between Britain and New Zealand. John Robson, one of New Zealand’s most powerful civil servants (and encountered earlier in the context of promoting Beveridge’s ideas on voluntarism), championed this originally Scandinavian idea inside the Ministry of Justice in the early 1960s. Robson had in turn been influenced by Beveridge himself, who during his 1948 tour had stressed the need to strike a balance between state action, voluntarism and the rights of the individual. New Zealand’s status as an English-speaking common law country

had then smoothed the passage of an Ombudsman into British law (in 1965) once Labour returned to power in the UK.⁹⁰

Equality as ‘national fetish’?

New Zealand’s cultural life presented a similarly mixed picture to the outside world, and so embodies the complexity of perceptions of the Dominion. Labour, as part of its own reform package, had made secondary education free and compulsory in the 1930s, with Fraser declaring that everyone ‘has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best suited and to the fullest extent of his powers’.⁹¹ Many more pupils stayed on at school to the age of sixteen, and then went on to tertiary institutions, than in Britain. But a booming birth rate (which more than doubled between the early 1930s and the mid-1950s) helped to cause an accommodation crisis and a chronic shortage of teachers.⁹² This made class sizes, both at primary and secondary level, a much more acute problem than in the UK.⁹³

But though New Zealand’s education system was, for the most part, highly efficient – and praised as such – observers suggested there were more qualitative and deep-seated problems. Some remarked there was not enough emphasis on the arts and humanities to stimulate any sort of intellectual debate. The New Zealand economist William Ball Sutch blamed his country’s schools and universities for Labour’s failure to rejuvenate its ideas after the 1930s, and for the National Party’s appeal to a mythical and ‘backward’ past.⁹⁴ ‘Orphans in a sea of materialism’, Goldblatt called the country’s academic efforts outside the practical sciences. According to Goldblatt, the century of European settlement had seen New Zealand ‘busy in chores, too preoccupied with “coping” to give birth in so short a time to an appreciation of the fine arts and the detachment and balance that speculation in the abstract demands’.⁹⁵ Some British Parliamentarians found New Zealand ‘conformist’, a phenomenon

in part ‘due to its isolation’, but also linked to its development as ‘a one-class society’. One Labour Peer (Viscount Samuel) described New Zealand thus: ‘[as] the Welfare State *par excellence*, with a very high standard of living, with few millionaires and few down-and-outs, the country tends to become not only conservative but dull’.⁹⁶

Such observers were condescending, even patronizing about New Zealand’s cultural endeavours. The British philosopher D.D. Raphael, Professor at the University of Otago between 1946 and 1948, thought that many New Zealand writers had ‘an excessive concern with society’, a ‘one-track mind’. He did concede that ‘it is generally recognized that New Zealand culture does not reach a very high standard by comparison with European countries’ such culture as there was had a ‘wider spread than... in England’. Nonetheless, the Dominion’s ‘isolation and small population’ limited what could be achieved.⁹⁷ He appeared unaware that New Zealand’s art scene was, for instance, benefitting at this point from the incorporation of ‘modern art’ in the primary school curriculum in the 1940s. Artists such as Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere were innovative, striking and influential.⁹⁸ Raphael was not alone in his notion of New Zealand’s cultural backwardness. James and Margaret Rowe made a familiar point when they noted, in the late 1960s, that ‘cultural activities have tended to be largely peripheral’ and where they did flourish it was because a ‘small body of dedicated, often very talented amateurs...have enthusiastically promoted a discipline in the face of discouraging lack of interest’.⁹⁹

To some of those mid-twentieth century Britons who chose to comment, New Zealand could sometimes seem rather simple, even Spartan – rather uniform and devoid of some of life’s pleasures. Such supposed defects were a long-running source of comment. New Zealander expatriates who had risen up the British class hierarchy could be dismissive of New Zealand’s supposed anti-intellectualism, with Oxford-based novelist Dan Davin regarding his compatriots as people who ‘go three times to *Gone with the Wind*, argue about

football matches and talk about motor-car gears'.¹⁰⁰ The local cuisine too was often the subject of negative comments. Visiting Scottish writer Eric Linklater, thought that New Zealanders 'spend their ingenuity, exhaust their interest, on cakes and pastries and ebullient...cream sponges'. But soup was 'neglected' and 'meat mishandled'. Although world-famous for its sheep production, Linklater claimed to 'have seen their admirable mutton brought upon the table in such miserable shape' that it looked as if it had been 'killed by a bomb, and the fragments of its carcase incinerated in the resultant fire'. One fish restaurant waitress told him: 'I wouldn't recommend a thing. I never touch their fish'.¹⁰¹

Outside commentators still persistently commented on the country's commitment to equality as 'the cardinal principle of New Zealand life... a national fetish, often operating in [an]... indiscriminate way'.¹⁰² This had been a key part of New Zealand's own self-image since the late nineteenth century and the face the country chose to show to the world. *The New Zealand Encyclopedia*, approved by the second Labour Government in 1959 and published in 1966, both reflected and projected the idea that egalitarianism was at the heart of Dominion life.¹⁰³ For New Zealanders, Lipson had already concluded, 'equality comes first, and it is within its content that liberty has been redefined'.¹⁰⁴

Conclusions: the burden and fragility of equality

Once Britain withdrew its Imperial patronage, and the protection New Zealand's trade had long enjoyed, the outcomes proved very harsh. After the UK joined the European Economic Community in 1973, and at the time of the first oil price shock, New Zealand's balance of payments deteriorated while inflation rose, and the economy shrank (on a *per capita* basis) for six consecutive years. Very high public spending and interventionist schemes under Prime Minister Muldoon's 'Think Big' programme failed to remedy the situation. Labour, returning

to power in 1984, removed capital controls, floated the currency and sold off large parts of the extensive public sector, for example telecommunications, though retaining much of the country's commitment to income equality via the tax system. These changes were, as Michael O'Brien has noted, 'both extensive and rapid'. More than this, though, they fundamentally changed the nature of New Zealand's social bargain between labour and capital, and the entire basis of its collective national life. The reasons for such a startling change of direction are complex, but their effects can be summed up as a shift from statist and Keynesian modes to the more liberal framework that was already taking hold in the UK.¹⁰⁵

Despite semi-serious though prolonged doubts about New Zealand's narrowly-drawn economy and apparently staid intellectual and political life, between the election of New Zealand's first Labour government in 1935 and the advent of the UK's Thatcher administration in 1979 New Zealand had represented a stimulating exemplar to British policymakers. New Zealand represented the possibilities and limits of social reform in a similar English-speaking and common law country. The traffic in ideas did continue after the early 1980s, in all directions, as it had since the nineteenth centuries – though now it seemed that the flow of new policy proposals ran more towards New Zealand, particularly from the USA, than the other way around.¹⁰⁶

New Zealand's beauty, but also the fragility of its many successes, had long been clear for all to see. As Bruce Mason in the late 1950s famously ended his famous paean to long-remembered schooldays, *The End of the Golden Weather*, prefiguring the inevitable demise of this uncomplicated vision of plenty, 'the pohutukawa flowers sag and drop away, the hard clear light of summer yellows and wavers; there is more and more sand between the bathers on the beach'.¹⁰⁷ If New Zealand was still a social laboratory, the sort of experiments it was carrying out in the late twentieth century were a long way from those conducted by the

likes of Seddon and Nash. Its reputation for forward-thinking but practical dynamism dimmed accordingly on the political left, especially among those British opinion formers who had long looked to the South Pacific for one source of inspiration.

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