



Understanding Social Change

New Labour, new society?

Sarah Neal

Hello, my name's Sarah Neal and I'm a Lecturer in Social Policy here at the OU. Today I'm joined by my friends Kath Woodward and Gerry Mooney. Kath researches racialised and gendered identities and is author of *Understanding Identity*.

Kath Woodward

Hello.

Sarah Neal

Gerry Mooney is a Social Science Staff Tutor in Scotland. Gerry's research interests are on Marx's Critiques of Contemporary Social Policy, and he's co-author of *Rethinking Welfare: a Critical Perspective*.

Gerry Mooney

Hi Sarah.

Sarah Neal

In 1997 marked a moment of change when a new Labour Government came to power.

Woman

I think the world of employment's different, young people have such high expectations that aren't always realised, pressures on young people are greater.

Man

Statistically the family unit's broken down, I don't think there's the commitment of the extended family that we used to have.

Woman

I think women have more opportunity to go part-time than they did previously, so that I would say from the point of opportunity it's better.

Man

There's less security but then people aren't necessarily satisfied in the job they're in so people are changing, and maybe changing for the better.

Woman

I can't honestly say I feel secure about my pension so I've bought one for myself. I think there's less certainty for pensions now.

Woman

I think that it's got worse as there are too many people that have grown up with the state providing.

Sarah Neal

What we're going to do today, we will look at theoretical perspectives and political ideologies. We will begin our discussions here by thinking about these theoretical perspectives. Let us first return to where we started and look at New Labour and an extract from Tony Blair's address to the Labour Party Conference in October 2002.

“Britain is a great country, on the way up, fourth largest economy in the world, the best mortgage, inflation and unemployment figures for a generation, long-term youth unemployment now down to just over five thousand for the whole of Britain. Compare that with three million unemployed under the Tories and then understand the difference a Labour government can make. And as a result, the welfare bills of failure are falling, so we can spend six billion pounds a year more today on pensioners than in 1997, and that’s also the difference a Labour government makes. In arts and in culture we lead the world in awards, prizes, talent; our armed forces are the best anywhere; our school system has now been judged by most authoritative analysis among the top eight in the world, ahead of France and Germany. More students go to university than ever before, our universities are widely regarded as the best in Europe.”

Sarah Neal

We heard there from Tony Blair making a claim for improvements in Britain under New Labour. Gerry, perhaps I could ask you – have things improved as Blair claims here in Britain?

Gerry Mooney

Yes absolutely, things have improved, they’ve improved if you’re rich, they’ve improved if you’re in the boardrooms of multi-national companies in Britain, and they’ve certainly improved if you’re one of the directors of the privatised companies that are now picking up huge contracts around the entrenchment of the welfare state and the public sector. I think the question that must be asked in response to your question is yes, they may have improved, but improved for whom? Because there’s always an issue that what’s good for some individuals, and some social groups, may not necessarily be good for everyone. And one of the key things that interests me is that since 1997 the pattern of rising inequalities that characterised the previous Conservative governments has also continued to grow under New Labour, and that must be a major issue given that New Labour was elected on the promise of redressing the marked inequalities that had characterised the 1980’s and the early 1990’s. So things have improved for some but I think for many, many others it’s a story of rising inequality that’s also a story of rising uncertainty, and if you look back again over the last couple of years in particular, but you know you can take them further beyond that, there’s also new uncertainties come into play, for example the current one is about pensions, an ongoing pension crisis, so people who may in 1997 thought that they had a secure pension, you know they were working to a time and date that they’d set at some time in the future, and they’d always have a secure, regular income when they retired, for many, many people the events of the last two or three years has really, you know, undermined that and, you know, contributed to a sense of growing uncertainty and perhaps growing insecurity.