

## TRUST – A POPPERIAN APPROACH AND A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

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This paper examines the concept and application of ‘trust’ in terms of an approach drawn from the work of Karl Popper.

Having taken an overview of the significance attached to trust in current political, sociological and organisational literature, the paper offers a model of the act of trust in terms of the procedure of trial and error:

- it considers trust as based on a hypothesis predicting the other person’s action;
- it sees that hypothesis as the product of an analysis of available knowledge and prejudgements about the other person and the logic of their situation;
- it regards the act of trust as the test of that hypothesis, upon which improved knowledge and further trust (or not) may be based.

Thus, the paper suggests how trust can be treated as a rational process. Trusting is in Popperian terms a ‘social experiment’, and one which necessarily risks failure.

The paper applies this analysis of trust to the New Labour Government of Tony Blair. The ‘Blair Project’ deliberately sought to increase public trust in the Labour Party during its years of opposition to the ruling Conservative Party and founded its successful campaign for the 1997 general election on a theory of trust. It continued to apply this theory to its government after 1997, and to date has seen the issue of trust as central to its political agenda. During this time, its trust by the electorate has been tested in two general elections and — recently to different effect — in opinion polls.

The paper demonstrates that the Blair Project worked on a theory of trust which was compatible with the Popperian model outlined above. Therefore, the paper takes the opportunity to examine the Blair Government as a social experiment in trust.

In conclusion, the paper reflects on the application of this theory and the learning from this social experiment both for governance and for theory of trust.