

EDITORIAL

Reorienting the left

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Labour, and the left, are in a mess, and there are no easy answers. Recognising this is a precondition for the renewal we need. Under our editorship, *Renewal* will interrogate the structures and contexts for a viable left politics, unearthing new ideas and initiatives that demonstrate the necessity and potential of a social democratic revival.

When *Renewal* began in 1993, the first line of the first issue was ‘*Renewal* will be a focal point for debate about the changes that Labour needs to make’. Much is implied by this statement, which still captures the basic purpose of the journal it is our privilege to edit. 2016 finds Labour, and the British left more broadly, at a challenging juncture. Electorally, the prospects seem bleak. Riven by cultural and ideological divides, confronted by a wary and disparate electorate, Labour faces a comparatively young and vigorous Conservative government, prepared to deploy its narrow parliamentary majority to ruthlessly reshape the constitution in its own electoral interests.

More fundamental than this, however, is a pervasive sense of political *disorientation*, one that afflicts populations and governments everywhere, but which is peculiarly fatal for parties of the centre left. When our predecessors wrote in the early 1990s, it was easier for ‘progressives’ to detect and adapt to the mood of the times. Whatever one might have thought about its constituent elements – the forward march of

economic growth, European integration and American hegemony – they seemed relatively evident, and stable. It is difficult to feel nostalgic for that era of the ‘end of history’; for Major, Yeltsin, Maastricht or Sarajevo. Yet history’s recommencement has left us strangely unprepared. The financial crisis, and a subsequent decade of stagnation and austerity, has proved also to be a crisis of European social democracy. In Britain, the accommodations that New Labour thought it had reached – with the City of London, with a post-industrial electorate, with changing patterns of demography and migration – have unravelled one by one.

In Britain and elsewhere, rising international tension and pervasive economic insecurity are breeding xenophobia and undermining the foundations of democratic society. Where resentment and inertia are the order of the day, the left will always struggle to prosper. But prosper we must. Among all but the most obstinate and irresponsible denizens of the political right, it is close to a truism that climate change and gross inequality pose major risks to the futures of human societies. There is an emerging elite consensus – among scientists, economists, technocrats and even CEOs – regarding the limits of our economic and political systems. Polluters, rent-seekers and oligarchs will not be brought to heel via seminars at Davos. We cannot trust to their enlightened self-interest to build a future worth living in. Yet while the volatility of democratic politics is certainly increasing, its ability to marshal meaningful constituencies for action appears frustratingly limited.

The challenge of mobilisation

As that first *Renewal* editorial also noted, the demise of the sociological basis for left politics – and for the British Labour party in particular – has often been predicted. In the 1990s, Labour defied such predictions by building a powerful electoral coalition in a post-industrial, property-owning, multiethnic society, with low trade union density. Further fragmentation of identities and occupations, alongside concerted Conservative attack on the public sector core of Labour’s support, pose dramatic new challenges. The exchange we carry in this issue, between Patrick Diamond and Ken Spours – figures associated with contrasting, yet complementary, iterations of Labour politics – draws attention to the scale of Labour’s current predicament. They, and we, are clear that the current leadership is neither the ultimate cause of the party’s problems, nor (in itself) the solution to them. Jeremy Corbyn lacks both critical friends and worthy opponents. *Renewal* aims to be a home for both.

At its most noble, Corbyn's project for the leadership of the party has promised open debate about policy and strategy, and a reconstruction of alliances with civil society and social movements. This is to be welcomed. Labour stands in desperate need of intellectual outriders, and new sources of information and ideas. *Renewal* will play its part in providing them: both through building new connections with academia and activism, and by developing a broader historical and international perspective on contemporary British politics and society.

A precondition for honest and open discussion, however, is that tribalism, virtue-signalling and mistrust are left at the door. A culture has taken hold within the Labour Party that reduces major and complex questions – Trident, Europe, the Middle East, political strategy – to indicators (variously) of the 'realism', 'moderation', 'principle' or 'socialism' of whoever is speaking. The brevity and performativity of social media discussion certainly feeds this tendency, but it has deeper roots in Labour's history and sense of itself. The idea that only the current leadership represents a 'true' Labour politics, and that dissent from some of its positions represents 'Blairism' or 'Toryism', will come as a surprise to anybody familiar with the party's longer-term history. Corbyn is not, ultimately, responsible for the confusion: it has been encouraged by New Labour's mistaken strategy of lumping the Bennite left together with the traditional social-democratic centre of the party as 'Old Labour'.

This sort of inter-factional identity politics is damaging to Labour at every level, and prevents it from engaging with the threats to its future. A key ambition for *Renewal* now is to transcend this exhausting mode of political argument, uncovering spaces for consensus and progress and debating the difficult choices that must be made. We rest our hopes on our format, as much as anything else. It is harder to mischaracterise opponents or deny basic political realities in long-form essays. Publishing quarterly, and in print, we are unlikely to offer much in the way of hot takes or outraged responses linked to the latest Shadow Cabinet controversy. Deep strategic thinking – driven by a sharpened analysis of our real political opponents, the Conservatives – needs time and openness, but also a sense of urgency. This is what we hope to provide.

Suspicion and mistrust are not just features of the Labour Party, but also of its relationship to rival anti-Conservative forces in British politics. Since the 1980s, the need for a 'progressive alliance' has been a reliable refrain of left commentary – particularly when Labour is in opposition. Short-term parliamentary arithmetic, as well as longer-term doubts about Labour's ability to govern alone, makes this an urgent concern in 2016, yet it has barely featured in Labour debates. The Conservatives

have a majority of just twelve, and there is considerable scope for policy convergence across a range of areas between Labour, the SNP, the Green Party, and what remains of the Liberal Democrats.

The 2010-2015 parliament, however, confirmed what many sceptical Labour activists had always claimed: the ultimate electoral interests of the Liberal Democrats and SNP lie in displacing Labour, rather than beating the Conservatives. The Coalition government, and the post-referendum condemnation of Ed Miliband as a 'Red Tory', have shattered many hopes and illusions. It is now a question for the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, as much as it is for Labour, whether or not they wish to cultivate the mutual respect and understanding necessary for future cooperation.

The challenge of consensus

In his last editorial for *Renewal*, Ben Jackson left us with a counter-intuitive claim: that the Labour Party is not nearly as divided as we think. He identified three key agendas that the labour movement can coalesce around: the abiding theme of tackling inequality, the devolution of power, and the forging of a workable synthesis of inspirational movement politics with an effective election-winning machine.

Jackson's point was well-made. There *are* significant 'points of contact' within the left today. Inequality is the key ground on which people from left, centre and right groupings within the party are attempting to unite. Jeremy Corbyn's January Fabian speech linked this agenda to his overarching theme of fairness. He drew on research from the OECD – another one of the explicitly free-market oriented organisations linking gross inequalities to slowdowns in growth as well as other socially undesirable outcomes – to hammer home the point that the escalation of profound inequalities is something politics needs to challenge. From the right of the party, Tristram Hunt made the same argument in his speech in December 2015, also to the Fabian Society. He claimed that Labour needs to emphasize that inequality is an issue that affects not only the extremes at the top and bottom but impoverishes – economically and socially – those in the middle too. These interventions are important, but they risk seeming abstract and instrumental. We need an ethical and inspirational reason to care about inequality – not just a narrow case for its iniquitous economic effects.

Addressing inequality has been one of *Renewal's* abiding themes. Last year, Daniel Stedman Jones outlined a vision for how the left can make a convincing case for equality to the majority of society – a case based on *values* as well as practical issues

like the effects of inequality on overall economic growth. The left needs to make the argument for greater equality on the basis of what equality can do for *freedom* – what it can do to empower people. Neoliberal economists like Hayek and Friedman, and Virginia School public choice theorists, did a good job from the 1960s onwards in re-defining the political common sense about ‘freedom’. They argued that freedom meant freedom *from* – most particularly, freedom from state interference, freedom within the market. But for the left, freedom needs to be freedom *to* – the empowerment of individuals. The left has always understood that collective provision is the key to empowering individuals to make the most of their lives. This is a point that was powerfully made by Lisa Nandy MP, another contributor to our current issue, in her 2014 Compass lecture on the subject of freedom and the left.

Viewed from this perspective, inequality scars our society not only when it comes to economic resources, but also when it comes to power. This matters within the firm as much as it does within our democracies. Here, too, there are points of contact between different components of Labour and the left. In our last issue, our new commissioning editor Joe Guinan argued that we need to ‘bring back the Institute for Workers’ Control’. This was a radical Bennite organisation that tried to envisage how workers could be empowered to shape the future of their industries, embedding them within communities and the environment.

Worker power and the firm was also a theme discussed from the opposite end of the party by Liz Kendall MP, during her leadership run last year. Arguing more from ‘Rhineland capitalism’ than the IWC, she pointed out that workers’ interest in their company’s performance may well be more informed and more long-term than that of many shareholders. Employees have greater insight than their managers into productivity, training, working arrangements and innovation. The ‘John Lewis’ model of shareholding; rights for employee representation on company boards; funding for employee buy-outs of faltering companies – these are crucial components of a new left agenda for freedom and power in the workplace.

Inequality, freedom, workers’ control. These are all promising areas where the left can work to alter the ‘common sense’ of British political life. But these loose threads and promising beginnings must be tied into a broader conversation about macro-economic management and responsibility, issues that will always enjoy more immediate electoral salience. It sounds rather ‘New Labour’, but there needs to be a narrative here. Stewart Wood notes the continuing relevance and potential of the concept of ‘predistribution’ in his contribution to this issue, but it does not, of itself, constitute an effective electoral strategy.

Policy and politics

The question of narrative highlights one of the major failings of Labour's 2015 election campaign. There were good policies – policies that polled well, that offered to improve people's lives in meaningful ways, and tackled issues like energy poverty and the chronically underfunded NHS. What was missing was a tangible overall promise of what a Labour government would mean, cumulatively, for the country and its sense of itself. Narrative requires both a sense of historical orientation and a way of talking to people. It requires a clear vision of the future.

Yes, Labour needs to 'take the fight to the Tories'. But criticising Cameron and Osborne for failing to meet their targets for economic growth, deficit reduction, or EU reform, without challenging the Tory narrative which justifies their overall approach, is not enough. Cameron's governments have consistently failed to do what they said they would do. That doesn't matter much, because people don't trust Labour to do any better. We need to re-write the agenda: to rewrite the narrative about the past and future.

This lack of narrative raises questions about Labour's policy-making process, a live issue for the current leadership. The 2015 'pledge card' (or stone) seemed like a narrow 'retail offer' – 'vote Labour and get a microwave', in David Axelrod's memorable phrase. Indeed, the language of 'offers' pervaded, and continues to shape, discussions of the 2015 campaign. Even if this was intended only for internal consumption, we should question its predominance. Some on the left have always harboured suspicions towards opinion polls and focus groups, particularly when these reveal harsh opinions (even prejudices) about migrants, the unemployed, or the Labour Party itself. Even at the level of process, there is a risk that excessive reliance on these techniques renders politics static and transactional: a sales-operation, rather than a dynamic interaction with a political community. But if we reject out of hand the data gathered from opinion polls and focus groups, what methods do we have for finding out what the majority of the electorate – only occasionally engaged with politics – think about political issues? We should be wary of being left with the tyranny of the canvasser's anecdote.

Many on the left are currently enthused about developing policy solutions from the bottom up – democratic innovations like citizens' assemblies. Jeremy Corbyn's engagement with this agenda so far has been limited to email plebiscites. More promisingly, John McDonnell has announced a national programme of lectures and debates on the theme of the 'new economics'. We'll be following that debate in the

pages of *Renewal*, from the perspective of process as well as substance. What do we gain by policy-making ‘from below’? And how can it be done most effectively? It remains to be seen if the politics of the ‘movement’ and the ‘open debate’ can – or should – be divorced from those of the poll and the strategy grid.

What’s politics for?

In this issue, Danny Dorling asks the big existential question: what should politics be *for*? What can it contribute to enabling people to live happy, fulfilled lives? We also take up some big policy areas related to that question. One is work and social security in changing times. The ‘Uber economy’ has garnered much reflexive criticism and praise in recent months. But the growth of this sort of work poses tough questions for the left. Uber disrupts not only private for-hire vehicle markets, but also changes broader transport patterns, and can have benefits in terms of liveability and green issues in cities. But the claim of those who support the ‘gig economy’ that people want ‘flexibility’ in work is problematically simplistic and in clear need of challenging. In this issue Tom Barker does just that. What people want are the tools to achieve the right balance of flexibility and security for themselves and for their families. The left needs to be thinking about how our social security systems can do that more effectively. This, however, cannot be contemplated in isolation from the unfolding refugee crisis and its relationship to the European principle of the free movement of people and goods. Bridget Anderson powerfully takes up the question of inclusion and exclusion in labour markets and welfare states in her dissection of the rhetorical strategies of ‘fantasy citizenship’.

Ken Spours argues in his contribution that the ‘most important issue by far to be faced is climate change and humanity’s relationship with the planet’. This is something Lisa Nandy takes up in this issue in her report on the Paris Climate Talks. Climate change is resolutely global and yet is also a local issue. As Nandy points out, local authorities have done impressive things to tackle sustainability, energy use and climate change. The left cannot be satisfied, particularly in a state as centralised as Britain, to leave control of the centre to the Tories. But there are clearly innovations happening at the level of local politics that can be linked up to provide a broader picture of how left politics can be transformatory. The left needs good news, and *Renewal* will aim to communicate stories of innovation and success within and beyond the United Kingdom.

The forward march of Labour now?

In the conclusion to his response to Ken Spours, Patrick Diamond returns to Hobsbawm's Marx Memorial lecture of 1978, 'The forward march of Labour halted?'. Hobsbawm's lecture is often referred to as the initial source of inspiration for Labour 'modernisers' in the 1980s. Hobsbawm, a long-time member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, argued that the sociological basis for Labour politics was crumbling. While the vast majority of the population was still 'proletarian' in the Marxist definition of the term, the erosion of Labour's solid base of unionised manual workers in heavy industries, women's increasing participation in the workforce, and the growth of an 'economistic' consciousness meant that Labour would have to change. It needed to appeal 'across class lines', to 'all who want democracy, a better and fairer society ... "all workers by hand and brain"'. It needed to recapture the sections of the working class vote lost to Thatcher by demonstrating that it stood for 'their interests and aspirations'.

Hobsbawm's analysis was not, in the end, nearly as iconoclastic as it was made out to be – or, indeed, as 'modernising' as New Labour came to be. Hobsbawm concluded, for example, that if unpopular policies like unilateralism were explained properly, the (reconstituted) working classes would realise they were in their true interests.

The sociological question – what is the base for left-wing politics today? – remains open. But, as that first *Renewal* editorial argued against Hobsbawm, we cannot allow sociological determinism to limit our options for the revival of the British left. What was so iconoclastic about Hobsbawm's lecture was, in fact, not so much his substantive analysis of sociology or policy but the questions he was prepared to pose. It will be via the quality, the difficulty and the seriousness of the questions we are willing to ask of the left, rather than prematurely prescriptive agendas or answers, that a renewed left project will start to emerge. The seriousness of our predicament demands an open mind. We hope *Renewal* will be a key site for this debate. We welcome all contributions, and invite readers to send articles and ideas to us on editorial@renewal.org.

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Further reading

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