

# Commentary

## Democracy, collective action, and the state

### *An exchange*

#### Tim Horton and Marc Stears

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**From:** Marc Stears

**To:** Tim Horton

Dear Tim

I hope you share my sense that this is an exciting time to be thinking anew about Labour and the priorities of the British left. There is an energy about Labour at the moment which is both sorely needed and stimulating to see.

It didn't necessarily seem as if it would be this way a year ago. The Labour leadership race did not really generate any great sense of debate or new direction in the Party. Perhaps it was just too muted because of the fact that the two leading candidates were brothers or perhaps it was because we were still all too stunned by the election defeat. But now I hope we will both agree that there is a sense that the Party is finding a direction again. Ed Miliband is also providing effective leadership both on short-term issues and on the long-term challenges facing Britain.

Where perhaps we might disagree is in the role that so-called 'Blue Labour' has played in this re-energising of the Party.

It seems to me that, for all of its faults, the debate that has surrounded 'Blue Labour', and that emerged from the e-book that launched that debate, *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, has contributed significantly (Glasman *et al.*, 2011). It has helped the Party find a new agenda and re-connect with parts of the public that had become distanced and detached during the last years of the previous Labour government.

It has done so in two ways. First, the 'Blue Labour' debate has placed the need for community-based politics right back at the heart of the Party's agenda. During the general election, the Conservatives had their 'Big Society', the Liberal Democrats had their tradition of 'neighbourhood campaigning', and we were left with almost nothing to compare. We had become far too reliant in our thinking – even if not actually in practice – on a statist

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model of social democracy, one that looked to Westminster and Whitehall for solutions for social problems without drawing on the energies of the people themselves. The debate over 'Blue Labour' reminded us that it didn't need to be like that. It reminded us, in particular, that throughout its history, Labour has been at its best when it has been the Party of local action, of co-operation, of small-scale action, as well as the Party of centralised state action. We were in danger of forgetting this crucial part of our tradition – the co-operative, guild socialist, municipal socialist part – and now that is right back at the forefront of our thinking.

Second, the 'Blue Labour' debate has also reminded us of the absolute centrality of democracy to Labour politics. People across the country – and especially within our own Party – had grown increasingly tired of the technical, managerial, and media-obsessed way of doing politics that had emerged in the New Labour years. We know why Blair and Brown created a disciplined Party machine; it was what was needed to beat the Conservatives back in the 1990s. But the Party had lost its soul in the process. Policy-makers had become removed from party members. There was a sense that there were only two kinds of people in the Party any more: those who wanted a career in professional politics and those who were willing to stuff envelopes or deliver leaflets. The sense of Labour as a democratic movement, where people enjoyed coming together, debating and doing, had disappeared. We now know that this has to be put right. 'Blue Labour' has started to help us think about how we might do that. The model of community organisations like London Citizens is helpfully invoked, and Movement for Change offers the beginning of a new way of doing politics within Labour. This is a tremendous step forwards.

Labour needed plentiful sources of intellectual and political renewal after the election defeat. 'Blue Labour' has been one such source.

All best  
Marc

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**From:** Tim Horton  
**To:** Marc Stears

Dear Marc

Thanks for your message. Yes, this is an exciting time. It is an extraordinary achievement that, one year on from being dumped out of power after thirteen years, we have a united Labour Party ahead in the polls. We have huge mountains yet to climb – I think we are still some way from properly reconnecting with parts of the public that we lost in power. But, under Ed Miliband's leadership, we are now making real progress.

Actually, I agree with you that Blue Labour has played a crucial role in helping the Party rethink its agenda – though there have been several dimensions to this. You seem reticent about mentioning the moral and cultural conservatism that can accompany an

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increased concern with what people hold dear; but I think this is an important and not necessarily unwelcome strain of Blue Labour thinking too – even if I don't always agree with it!

As we clearly agree on a lot, let me respond to the challenge you throw down on localism. Like you, I'm glad Labour is now thinking more seriously about this agenda. But I would warn against fetishising localism – which I think is a danger of the Blue Labour agenda – whether from the perspective of historicism, participatory democracy or social capital.

Let's put aside for the moment the real equity concerns that exist about increased localism. Let's also put aside the fact that localism is often not especially popular as a way of organising public provision.

My problem is when small-scale, local action is held up as a model of collectivism that is necessarily preferable to, or more virtuous than, large-scale collective action. I would question that. Yes, when centralised public schemes are done badly they can be remote, passive and unresponsive; but at their best they can have just as much solidarity, agency and energy as local schemes, if not more.

On a related note, while your charge that Labour was too 'statist' in power may well be true in some areas, it wouldn't be my defining critique of the last thirteen years. Very often under New Labour the solution wasn't more state, but more market – from deregulation to choice-and-contestability to PFI. And many of the problems now held against Labour by the electorate are due to us having been slightly too in awe of free-market ideology. To look back and argue that the problem was we were too statist strikes me as very strange indeed. In this sense, Blue Labour's charge of excessive statism and its antidote of decentralisation doesn't seem new; if anything, it echoes Tony Blair's 'public service reform' narratives of 2003-2007.

Finally, I'd be wary of overestimating the number of people that wish to, and have the opportunity to, participate in local action. Surveys consistently show depressingly few people prepared to get involved in anything more than light-touch activities. I wish there was a widespread thirst for greater local involvement, but currently there isn't. Perhaps that's what we need to focus on encouraging first?

Yours  
Tim

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**From:** Marc Stears  
**To:** Tim Horton

Dear Tim

Many thanks. It's great to see that we share the enthusiasm for Labour's current sense of direction.

You are right to note that I didn't emphasise the 'conservative' strand of the 'Blue Labour' discussion. That's because I think it has been over-stressed in the commentary.

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The best aspects of 'Blue Labour', for me, were never the conservative ones. They were the democratic ones. Labour should value what the people of Britain value, and that means democratic empowerment. The accusations of nostalgia were always misplaced. No-one in a radical party like Labour can want to return to the community spirit of old. Labour's challenge is to contribute to the building of a new spirit of mutual responsibility in our country and not to try to restore elements of the past.

That takes me to your main challenge, the sense that 'Blue Labour' might be tempted to fetishise localism at the expense of national, collective action.

I appreciate the anxiety here. Labour governments have always been effective agents of national collective action. The NHS is the classic example. A health service for the nation, run by the nation's representatives, even if only indirectly. And I understand your criticism of New Labour that it turned away from central control too often, and invested too much enthusiasm in commercial models.

But there is something crucially important missing in this standard account. Ed Miliband put it brilliantly recently when he said that Labour too often reforms the 'fabric of our society' without considering the 'ethic of our society'. What he meant by that is that although we must improve our public services, redistribute wealth and opportunity, and run things efficiently and effectively, we must always try to work to create a greater spirit in our country, a spirit that is focused on building a common good together.

You might be right to say that people are not overwhelmingly demanding the right to be involved in local decision-making at present. But Labour has to be a campaigning force as well. Labour is at its best when it says, powerfully and straightforwardly, that we cannot accept things as they are. I hope everyone on the left would agree that there is too much alienation, individuation, and generalised hostility in Britain today. There are too many parts of society that do not feel as if they are listened to and they often lose their sense of responsibility to our common projects as a result. The solution to that has to lie in enhanced democratic opportunities.

Putting that another way, I would say that the chance to engage together in building a common good is crucial to overcoming the divisions in our society. And I would also say that such a chance is always going to be 'local' in some sense. Labour has to find a way of opening up these real democratic opportunities. It could involve transformations of decision-making in the workplace, in our towns and cities, or in our devolved public services. The conversation on the details has only just begun and I don't think anyone would claim that we yet have the detailed answers that we need. But the conversation is a crucial one.

'Blue Labour' emerged so strongly precisely because we have been too silent in these areas for far too long. New Labour, whatever its strengths, did almost nothing to make people feel as if they had the opportunity to come together to shape their own collective lives. It saw people almost entirely as consumers of services, be they public or private, rather than as co-citizens, coming together to forge a life in common. Our Party can be better than that.

All very best

Marc

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**From:** Tim Horton  
**To:** Marc Stears

Dear Marc

I think you're spot on when you say the issue is how we come together as citizens 'to forge a life in common'. And I think you are right that democratic engagement is a key part of the solution to this (though blunt forms of direct democracy – like petition-signing and referenda – will ultimately be less successful in bringing people together than more deliberative modes of participation, where people actually have to engage with each other's views).

But I don't think democratic engagement is the only issue. For me, there is a more general issue about human relationships here – about how, as a society, our practices and institutions can foster meaningful relationships between people. Yes, this could work through democratic engagement; but it could also work more prosaically – through social interaction, through our common membership of a scheme, or even simply through us sharing the same lived experiences. So in addition to a renewed emphasis on democratic participation, I think Blue Labour's concern must extend to revitalising this relational aspect of our politics more generally.

As you say, New Labour's public service reform agenda certainly failed this challenge: market exchange is a very 'thin' conception of human relationships and consumerism is an utterly individualised model of empowerment.

But I do accept your point too that Labour's traditional statecraft often got this wrong. In government, we were right to focus on policy outcomes like poverty, waiting times and exam results. But an approach to public sector management that set targets and then left administrators to implement them meant that different ways of reaching these targets were often seen as equally valid, even if some of them did violence to the 'ethic of our society'. It's a problem, for example, if Children's Centres are seen simply as places that offer children's services, given they often function as important points of social life in our communities. Too often over the last decade, policy was narrowly focused on the functions of our institutions, neglecting how we value their structure and culture. And it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that, historically, Fabianism has often been a source of this kind of detached and technocratic policy-making (though this is not 'the state'; it is the state done badly).

I think when you describe meaningful engagement as 'local' it's because you want to highlight a particularly rich type of social relationship – one we often associate with proximity or face-to-face interaction. I would still caution, however, against applying this concept of the 'local' too literally; physical and emotional distance can be very different things. From the BBC to the monarchy, the national can be just as powerful a source of interconnectedness and belonging as the local. Conversely, when the local is going wrong it can feel as remote as anything (my binman can certainly be as distant as any bureaucrat).

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I say this not because I think localism is unimportant, but because I also want Labour – and Blue Labour – to be exploring how we can invest our national programmes with more agency and empowerment. When large-scale institutions are remote, the solution shouldn't always be breaking them up into smaller units, but to ask how we can make them sites of meaningful relationships too. In this spirit, our recent Fabian book *The Solidarity Society* argued that the welfare states most successful at tackling poverty are not those that redistribute in the most efficient way, but those that foster strong social bonds that make people want to support public welfare (Horton and Gregory, 2009).

Ultimately, what we need are approaches to public policy that nurture our relationships, and this may mean placing traditional criteria of efficiency, simplicity and value-for-money alongside wider notions of social value, including democratisation. I hope this will be one of the most important legacies of Blue Labour – and look forward to seeing where this agenda goes.

Yours  
Tim

**Tim Horton** was Research Director and Deputy General Secretary of the Fabian Society, and is now a senior policy advisor to Ed Miliband. He is the author, with James Gregory, of *The Solidarity Society* (Fabian Society, 2009). **Marc Stears** is Professor of Political Theory at Oxford University and a Visiting Fellow at the ippr. His latest book is *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

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