

Editorial

Twenty years of *Renewal*: Labour, New Labour, social democracy

Ben Jackson

To leaf through the back issues of *Renewal* is a gripping but disquieting experience; it brings back the mixed political emotions of the last twenty years. The excitement, and relief, of the run-up to 1997, with the end of the long Conservative night and the emergence at last of a viable centre-left governing project. The awkward, but still hopeful, adjustment to the realities of government, as long overdue reforms moved from theoretical debate in publications such as *Renewal* to the official policy of the British state. And of course, as the issues flick past, there is also disillusionment, spreading like a stain until it obscures even the strong parts of Labour's record in power.

As *Renewal* reaches its twentieth year of publication, it is salutary, in considering the journal's future agenda, to remind ourselves of *Renewal*'s history.

A journal of Labour and New Labour politics

Renewal emerged from the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) in the wake of the 1992 general election. The LCC had been a leading element in the realignment of Labour's soft left behind the modernisation of the party and played an important role in Labour's return as a force capable of commanding wide popular support. Or, in the more pungent summary to be found in Robin Cook's diary:

Renewal, a thoughtful leftist magazine, which was born out of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee who had been an important part of the coalition taking on the Trotskyists and exposing their intellectual bankruptcy. (Cook, 2004, 302)

The struggle with the far left may have been successful, but defeat in 1992 was an unforgiving metric of the distance Labour still had to travel. A political journal could provide valuable space in which to debate Labour's intellectual and political dilemmas, and so *Renewal*, under the editorial stewardship of Neal Lawson and Paul Thompson, was born. As the initial editorial statement of the journal observed:

The fourth Conservative election victory brought home the deep crisis of ideas facing Labour and the left of British politics. Yet there are insufficient means for political dialogue, in-depth analysis and strategic debate to reverse that trend. It is against that background that the Labour Co-ordinating Committee and Lawrence and Wishart launched this journal.

The statement added: 'We are unashamedly a journal of Labour politics' (*Renewal*, 1993).

But it was with the ascension of Tony Blair to the party leadership and the emergence of 'New Labour' that *Renewal* moved to the heart of the political action. 'A journal of Labour politics' became 'A journal of New Labour politics', and *Renewal* offered one of the key venues in which the emerging shape of the Blair and Brown era was delineated and debated. It was judged by commentators to be 'the modernisers' house journal – New Labour before the term was invented' (Happold, 2003). Some of the key figures involved in the journal were later described as 'the shock troops of Blairism in 1994-5' (Wintour, 2003).

In retrospect, it is easy to forget that the rise of Blair was accompanied by considerable good-will from academics and intellectuals: part of his appeal was a promise to rethink open-mindedly the left's agenda and to take on the ossified social hierarchies sustained by the British establishment. In this respect, Blair's allure resembled the similar appeal briefly exercised by Harold Wilson and that beginning to be enjoyed by Ed Miliband today. Blair himself set out this agenda in a contribution to *Renewal* shortly after becoming leader. He called for a wide-ranging debate on the left about the key policy issues that confronted Labour:

Renewal is a journal that has recognised the need for modernisation from the beginning. It has been a valuable forum for debate. Its relaunch this month will, I hope, give it a new lease of life as a journal that will continue to think imaginatively and fearlessly, giving a platform to a wide range of views on the left. The left I believe is back in business – ready to provide the leadership this country needs. It must now show the confidence and open-mindedness to map out this new course for Britain. (Blair, 1994, 16)

In a sense, Blair was not wrong, either about *Renewal* or about his government. The salad days of New Labour offered a relatively fertile period of debate about British public policy and how the left might respond to the consequences of Thatcherism. The pages of *Renewal* displayed a frenetic intellectual optimism as academics, advisors, think tank researchers and politicians weighed in on stake-holding; Britain and Europe; constitutional reform; the welfare state; inequality; lessons from Sweden and Germany; the third way and all the other key topics of the time. Some pregnant questions were also posed, but found no clear answer from those who forged policy rather than analysed it. 'Whatever happened to industrial strategy?' wondered one contributor in an article published in 1997 (Henderson, 1997). 'Should we continue with the de-regulated labour market?' asked another in the same year (Corry, 1997). 'What exactly is the third way?' pondered various *Renewal* writers (notably the classic analysis of White, 1998).

Although *Renewal* was intended as an ecumenical space for left debate, it also sought to advance a certain kind of left politics: 'economically egalitarian, socially liberal and politically pluralist' (Lawson and Thompson, 2003). As it became clear that the Labour government's progress on all three of those objectives would be slow, disillusion began to seep in. In this respect, the pages of *Renewal* again reflected the wider feelings of the British left.

From New Labour to social democracy

What happened next is a matter of public record, since *Renewal's* proximity to New Labour meant that its increasingly critical stance on Labour's record in government attracted greater attention than is usually enjoyed by a quasi-academic journal. *Renewal*, and the strand of political opinion it represented, became another ally to exit Blair's big tent and to hope for something better under Gordon Brown (for a full account of *Renewal's* disengagement from New Labour, see Lawson and Thompson, 2007).



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A seminar to mark the 10th anniversary of the journal held in 10 Downing Street apparently prompted a full and frank exchange of views (Wintour, 2003), while in 2004 Neal Lawson and Paul Thompson gave Blairism both barrels in a *Renewal* editorial deemed sufficiently noteworthy to form the basis of a news piece in *The Guardian*:

We did genuinely think that Blair would open up spaces to reshape and renew social democracy. We were wrong. Gradually that early promise of a new politics has receded and it is blatantly obvious that there is no point waiting for or wanting a better Blair. (Quoted in Wintour, 2004)

Brownism remained as yet untested and, thanks to Brown's shrewd political positioning, there was undoubtedly support in *Renewal* and among the wider left for a Brownish regime.

But the important shift in the journal's political stance was not really trading one savvy centrist political operator for another. More significant was an effort to put some distance between *Renewal* and partisan identification with any particular faction of the Labour Party; or indeed with an unqualified assertion of support for Labour at all. No-longer a journal of Labour or New Labour politics, it was relaunched in 2007 as 'a journal of social democracy'. As the new editorial statement observed:

In the ideas and policies the journal has sought to promote in recent years, *Renewal* has tried to develop a broader dialogue on the progressive left. This reflects its long standing view that the real project was only incidentally about modernising Labour. The wider goal was to revitalise the historic purpose of social democracy – to expand the scope of equality, democratic governance and social freedoms within regulated markets. Real modernisation is about the process of reconnecting and reshaping those goals in new social, economic and political contexts. It is against that template that we evaluate the policies and practices of Labour or indeed any organisation. (*Renewal*, 2007)

Of course, the politics of the Labour Party remained central to the ideas that *Renewal* sought to advance, since Labour was surely indispensable to any viable British social democracy. But the less intimate relationship with the party was an understandable response to the various disappointments and missed opportunities of New Labour in office, and to the apparent relish with which the government sought to alienate its natural supporters.

However, as the new editor, Martin Mclvor, observed in his first editorial, the term 'social democracy' itself raised numerous questions and difficulties. It was therefore in a

broad, open and necessarily contested sense that this journal will interpret its new remit to explore and develop the politics of social democracy. Social democracy not as a set of policies or institutions, nor even necessarily a tradition of ideas and practices, but as a problem that confronts us today, whatever we think of that history, and whatever use we make of it. (Mclvor, 2007, 7)

This is the spirit that has infused the journal's subsequent direction. The problem of social democracy, as Mclvor diagnosed it, was the difficult, perhaps even unstable, combination of gradualist democratic politics with frankly utopian leftist goals of individual flourishing, economic equality, and democratic association. Yet, from a democratic perspective, there is no other game in town: electoral politics and public policy remain the principal arenas in which freedom, equality and deeper democracy have to be won, inch by excruciating inch.

Under its new strap-line *Renewal* explored the dilemmas faced by social democrats, in



Britain and around the world, as they sought to orchestrate democratic collective action against widening economic inequality and growing corporate power. In doing so, *Renewal* has tried to bridge the yawning gap that has emerged between the exponents of a minimalist left electoral politics on the one hand and the unflinching leftist critics of unprincipled governmentalism on the other.

***Renewal* now**

With this issue, I take over as *Renewal* editor. We also welcome some new members to our Editorial Advisory Board – Gregg McClymont MP, Rachel Reeves MP, and Chuka Umunna MP – and to our editorial team – Lewis Goodall, Martin O’Neill, James Stafford, and Duncan Weldon.

The outstanding work of my predecessors as editor – Paul Thompson, Neal Lawson and Martin McIvor – means that there is a lot to live up to. The editorial transition does not mark a new departure in the guiding philosophy of the journal (although we have updated our editorial policy statement to reflect the new political situation). We will continue to debate how to construct a Britain, and a world, that is economically egalitarian, socially liberal, and politically pluralist. The febrile political landscape created by economic crisis and austerity bequeaths to us a gamut of tricky issues and dilemmas that cry out for the kind of scrutiny that *Renewal* specialises in.

Of course, the infrastructure of left-wing debate in Britain has changed since the first issue of *Renewal* was published. Where the initial editorial statement diagnosed that there was ‘insufficient means’ of political dialogue and strategic debate on the left, Britain is now blessed with a vibrant left civil society: blogs, websites, think tanks, pressure groups, magazines, and even the odd journal all publish an outstanding range of views and ideas, often freely available on the internet. In that sense, *Renewal* cannot claim any particular distinctiveness. But the blogosphere and media aim at short, pithy interventions in immediate political controversies rather than long-range, detailed analysis, and this is where *Renewal* has something to offer.

Renewal tries above all to deepen the debate on the British left. It places day-to-day political arguments in their wider context; brings ideas and analysis to the British left that are hard to come by elsewhere; highlights developments on the left outside of Britain; and fosters fruitful connections between academic research and public affairs. Eschewing bland rhetorical fudges, *Renewal* aims to subject the left’s politics to honest, constructive, and rigorous scrutiny, since such fundamental discussion is an integral component of the creation of any successful left-wing political project. And it is this agenda that we will pursue in future issues. *Renewal* is not the house magazine of any organisation, group, or faction: our pages are open to anyone who wants to advance debate on the left by making an intellectually robust argument.

In political terms, after twenty years we seem to find ourselves back where *Renewal* started: a grim, slapdash, and elitist right-wing government occupies power; Labour is required to build a new progressive coalition to oust it; and with this in mind a dynamic young leader is trying to push Labour in a fresh direction. Haven’t we been to this party before? Perhaps we have, but there is reason to think that the prize is much greater this time round: the fruits of the neo-liberal settlement are now in question as never before, and the political space on the left is accordingly larger.

As an early *Renewal* contributor once said in another context: the kaleidoscope has been shaken, the pieces are in flux. Before they settle, there is a chance to make tangible gains for the egalitarian and democratic objectives of social democracy. *Renewal*, for one, will be joining those putting their shoulders to the wheel over the next few years to

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advance that end. The experience of our first twenty years suggests that it won't be easy, but that there will be a lot to think and argue about along the way.

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