

INTERVIEW

Principles, not mechanisms: Lisa Nandy MP

interviewed by James Stafford

Since her election as MP for Wigan in 2010, Lisa Nandy has become a prominent advocate for an emerging strain of pluralist, communitarian Labour politics. Alongside recent contributions on feminism and public service reform (Nandy, 2014a, Nandy, 2014b), Nandy has made a lengthy and distinctive intervention into the party's ongoing debate on policies and values in her 2014 Compass Lecture (Nandy, 2014c). This tried to reclaim the idea of 'freedom' from the neo-liberal right, via appeals to the republican political theory of Quentin Skinner and Phillip Pettit. As Shadow Minister for Civil Society, Nandy has had considerable scope to put some of this thinking into practice as one of Labour's key advocates for social and political reform. James Stafford met Nandy at Westminster at the start of the year, to discuss Labour's developing agenda and prospects for government in 2015.

Post-referendum prospects for 'One Nation'

What lessons can Labour draw from the referendum in Scotland? Can 'One Nation' really now be an appropriate theme for the party's policy and campaigning?

The question arising from the referendum is how is it that we came to be on a different side to other socialists, other working class socialists quite often, who had the same vision of Britain that we do: a society based on social justice, a much less individualistic and materialist society. Those are some of the things I talked about in the Compass lecture to do with freedom: collective freedom as opposed to purely individual freedom. A lot of people who voted Yes in the referendum had very similar ideas about the kind of country they wanted to build. So I think we as a party have a lot of work to do: we'll always have more in common with those socialists who said Yes than with the Tories who said no. We've got a lot of work to do to build

that movement. But that's what 'One Nation' was really about – saying that there are common ties that bind us, within the UK, and outside; we need to work harder to find that, and find that social glue that holds us together, where we recognise our responsibilities to one another, and work together to raise ourselves up together. The national side is not the point.

But it raises a pretty urgent question about what the boundary is of the collectivity or the community that's being raised up. For lots of people, and not just in Scotland, the UK simply isn't a relevant community anymore.

This is where I think the work Jon Cruddas has been doing is really important. Obviously he's been running the policy review for a few years, but before that he was working on themes of power and identity, across the country and across communities. However you carve it up – whether you say it's the nations of the UK, or the One Nation of the United Kingdom, or you take an international perspective; whatever way you carve it up, there's a tension, something that Labour has always recognised, about how much more remote things become from people's lives as you work together in bigger and bigger units to try and bring benefits to people.

Michael Young wrote this pamphlet, which I discussed in the Compass lecture (Nandy, 2014c), called *Small Man Big World* (Young, 1949); it's exactly that conundrum that many communities are facing today. This is the sort of thing that UKIP are trying to tap into and exploit: this feeling of disconnectedness and uprootedness, not having a lot of power and control over things that really matter in your life – your workplace, your family, your public services. And the work that Jon's done is a recognition that that's always where Labour has been. We forgot during 13 years in government that the state is only as strong as the people who can participate. When Cameron first talked about the Big Society, which later became a sham, and a disaster – that was initially a really important recognition that between the state and the market there's this thing called society where a lot of people are, and where people are doing a lot of the really important things and taking part and exerting control. That's where the interesting, creative stuff is coming from.

Why would any government wish to multiply opposition to itself?

I agree with you that's the big challenge – parties talk about this sort of thing in opposition and then struggle to take it into government. But for Labour, in particular, it's the only way: the vision that Cruddas has put forward is the only thing that can take us forward. In here, in four and a half years, I've spent a lot of time watch-

ing Coalition ministers pull levers with no strings attached; tinkering with legislation, shuffling around money, writing letters to local authorities demanding that they do certain thing. It's like the Emperor's New Clothes: everybody sees that it's not working, the power isn't here anymore, if it ever was. It's dispersed in the community, and our job is to break down those barriers and make sure people can exercise it.

This problem is going to be particularly severe when you have a government that might not have much of a majority, implementing fairly heavy spending cuts.

I think that what people want from politics has changed. A lot of the public debate feels very early-90s; a lot of people saying you've got to find ways of cobbling together some kind of coalition of voters who are going to get you over the line, get you into power. I don't think people are remotely interested in politicians who are going to try and talk about electoral gains, and think about politics like that. I don't think they're really interested in triangulation – the immigration debate is a really good example; we like refugees but we hate asylum seekers; this type of migrant good, that bad... They're not interested in that. When Margaret Thatcher died, and Tony Benn died, people took to the street both for and against. It's really hard to look at politics now and imagine that happening for my generation of politicians elected in 2010, for example. But that's what people are looking for. Even when they don't agree with you I think they respect it when you show passion and authenticity, if they can see who you are and what you're about.

In the end, I don't think most people vote for a political party based on an issue. They might be very swayed by a particular issue, but most people put a tick in the box next to the person, the party, the movement who they think, if this all goes wrong, I would trust these guys to do the right thing. Jon Cruddas and Arnie Graf were clear from the beginning that the policy review, and the rebuilding of the Labour movement, were two parts of the same project.

In the same way, what was really depressing after the referendum was the way in which immediately the Westminster bubble started up again about EVEL, regional parliaments – cart before horse stuff; mechanisms, not principles. The really exciting thing about Scotland was that there was a whole nation of people engaged in the debate about the sort of country they wanted to live in, about the values they wanted that country to be based on; and straight away after we got the result, some of the people in here were back to the structures and mechanisms and politics; people are desperate for that bigger debate about values, about building a better

country. They might not always agree with us, but that's OK. We might not always be right.

It strikes me, though, that a lot of politics takes place at the point of tension between values and structures. For instance, Labour now seems committed to a policy of 'supply-side socialism', developing banking and governance infrastructure to raise productivity rather than trying to increase demand through additional deficit spending. But we have very underfunded public services, and the principles and values of social justice surely demand immediate spending on those before they get any worse.

I think there is a choice, in the short term. The size of the envelope can be bigger or smaller depending on the choices that we make. There is an emerging difference between the political parties on the way they want to reduce the deficit and how far they want to go in doing that. Even in the short term, if you want to rebuild the economy, there is a choice between spending on capital projects and spending on day-to-day public services, and it's a difficult one, because as you say, public services are definitely in trouble. The public service I know best is social care, children's social care, and there are huge problems with children's social care, which only money can solve. But the problem is how you can grow that spending envelope. You have to do it in a sustainable way. What we learned in 13 years in government is that the trickle-down economics the Tories are still wedded to, where you let the rich get super-rich and then cream off some of that money at the top in order to help people at the bottom, actually isn't sustainable. If that isn't sustainable, how do you grow the economy? It's the way that Ed Miliband talked about: putting money into the pockets of people who are on lower incomes. A government that came in and prioritised new schools, roads, hospitals, got people into work, got people into apprenticeships, got people spending again; boosted the minimum wage, got people off this revolving door of short-term contracts and zero hours... That would have a massive impact in constituencies like mine, and many others around the country, where people talk about a recovery but it's not touching us at all.

It just strikes me that an obvious complement to that strategy would be raising aggregate demand overall through the sort of stimulus we had in 2008-9, rather than simply adopting a milder programme of cuts.

There is a bigger difference between the Tories and Labour. We are prepared to borrow for capital budgets, to invest. What we're not prepared to do is borrow on an

ongoing basis just to spend on public services. That's difficult, incredibly difficult, but if you want to grow the economy you should borrow to invest in infrastructure.

Reviving civil society

Turning a little more to your shadow cabinet brief, what does Labour actually propose to do to restore another kind of infrastructure, the legal and physical space for some of that vibrant civil society you were talking about; around protest laws, judicial review...

First of all, we're going to repeal the Lobbying Act. Going alongside that there's an issue with gagging clauses in public contracts. Obviously, there are necessary data protection provisions that you'd never get rid of, but there are some really crystal-clear examples of things being written into contracts that are plain wrong, for example in the work programme in my area, where the prime and the sub-prime contractors were made to sign something saying they would never do or say anything that would bring the DWP into disrepute; really broad-brush, legal clauses in contracts which instill a culture that ensures people don't speak out, even when they see things going wrong. We're going to get rid of those.

There are also some real issues for charities and campaigning groups at a local level. A lot of those organisations are very dependent on local or regional grants from government, and this makes it difficult for them to criticise government policy. So we'll not just reinvigorate the 'compact' between civil society and government at a national level, but we'll ask local councils to do it too, as Newcastle already have done. This will hopefully instill a culture of greater confidence in speaking out more freely about the delivery of public services. The view from the sector was that you can't force cultural change, but you can help to create it.

There's also a bigger agenda around making sure people feel empowered and able to take part; they need to have time, money and confidence to feel able to do it. All governments go on about volunteering and wanting to get more people involved. The only way we can widen that pool of people is through intensive work in communities, but the bigger cost-of-living agenda, extending free childcare, clamping down on zero-hour contracts, raising the minimum wage – all of these things really matter, people are really struggling with insecure work and insecure tenancies, it's really hard with the best will in the world for them to take part. We've got to crack that.

You spoke a lot about surveillance in your Compass lecture, and it has been a really marked feature under this government, but also under the previous government, how much

more difficult it has become to take to the streets in whatever capacity, due to the privatisation of public space but also due to increased police activity, the use of anti-terror laws to control fairly harmless student groups... Is there an interface between Labour's security agenda and its civil society agenda?

It's obviously a difficult time to be talking about this, with the events in Paris this morning. There's a lot of concern, not just among politicians, although as a politician you do feel a particular responsibility to be sure that people are safe, but there's a lot of concern among the public as well about safety and security. But this is one of the reasons I wanted to do the Compass lecture on freedom. They initially suggested doing something about the state and the role of the state, which is interesting and important, but the left talks about that all the time. But where there's a problem, is that except for a few lone voices like Tom Watson, I don't hear people on the left talking about freedom, which has allowed the right to capture and define the concept. When we do talk about, we talk about needing to restrict it, not in the context of encouraging it.

We tend to frame debates on security as a tension between our collective freedom to demonstrate versus our collective freedom to be safe from harm. But if you look at the liberties we have given up over the past decade or longer, we've ceded that control to small groups of people who are largely outside the democratic process. That's the real problem: I think it's quite a frightening place for a country to have got itself into. There's a lot of interest in the party about opening that space up and having that conversation away from the heat and the drama of terrorist incidents.

Do you think that under a Labour government parliament square would be open again?

Presumably that relies a lot on the Mayor of London to make that call. So it depends on who becomes Mayor. I wouldn't like to hazard a guess about who that might be, so long as it's Labour! I tend to think, there are obviously lots of London issues, and a lot of street-based protest is based in London. But the vast majority of my constituents aren't that interested in whether people can shout through megaphones in parliament square or even take to the streets for a huge demo. Quite a few have been down in the last few years, but the vast majority haven't. There is a much bigger agenda about whether they can make their voices heard locally and regionally.

So you'd take the local infrastructure of civil society and government more seriously than the symbolism of national protest?

Perhaps, yes. We've just had this deal done in Manchester, I've been quite furious about it. 'Devo-Manc' – it's basically ten blokes going in to a room, carving up a deal between them, and as a result we get some new powers, which are welcome, largely money that was already ours loaned back to us by the Treasury with a bit more flexibility; and a Mayor who is unelected, at least until 2017, that nobody asked for and nobody voted for; who doesn't, under the current arrangements, have any scrutiny of him – and it will be a man, because the deal's already done – at all. People have said we don't want a London-style Mayor; it's not even a London-style mayor because there's no scrutiny at all! And all of it has been done in the name of 'empowerment.'

I'm a big fan of city regions, if you can make them work properly. But the idea that the people of Wigan have the same needs as the people of Trafford, or the City of Manchester, is farcical; even within my constituency there are different communities with competing interests, and somehow those need to be reconciled. They're not going to be reconciled if you start from the perspective of ten blokes in a room, who may not have set foot in many of those communities, coming up with a solution between them. I think it's a thread running through the lecture – that when you put a lot of people together, good things tend to happen. It's a messy process, there isn't one public, there are lots of competing demands within communities. It's hard and difficult and frustrating and lengthy; but when you find a way forward together, the answer is almost always better than anything that a small group of people can come up with in a closed room. That's where a lot of my commitment comes from. I don't see us getting over the huge challenges in this country that the state can't solve by itself – loneliness, the ageing population, youth unemployment – the state can't handle those on its own.

It seems to me that there's a growing 'Tory localism' that you can see in Scotland from Ruth Davidson, but maybe also with this devo-Manc project; where it's about saying, 'OK, you want power? Raise your own taxes, spend your own taxes...'

Yes, and 'go it alone'! There is definitely a move towards a more federal system. People have quite a strong desire for that...

You think the demand is actually there for more regional government? Despite the famous lack of interest in city mayors or the North-Eastern assembly?

The problem there was that we moved the debate right back to politicians and political structures, and cut out the interesting bit, which is about people having

much more say and control over their lives. I'm not against Mayors, but I also don't think people are especially interested in more politicians. What they are interested in is being able to hold the politicians that they do have to account for the decisions that they make. Greater Manchester is an interesting case, where you've had a lot of local councils, predominantly but not all Labour, who've worked together over a long period of time to balance competing interests across a city region, and who have come through that stronger as a result. But there is a problem, in that already people in my constituency feel the local council is very remote; and when the leader of that council goes off to make decisions in conjunction with the other greater Manchester authorities, it is basically impossible to hold him to account. If you then concentrate *all* of that power into one individual, and don't give the public any scrutiny or ability to monitor what that individual does, that's when people turn off.

The problem with what's happening with regional government at the moment is that London, Whitehall, has all the power, so you have a negotiation going on like with 'devo-Manc'. It's not a negotiation if one party has all the power. You end up with a stupid solution that nobody asked for, and that nobody wants, that as far as I can see has turned the people who were interested and excited about this agenda off it already. That's the problem. You have to let people debate mechanisms and principles among themselves, and give them a say in the process.

Towards a constitutional convention

Is that what the constitutional convention that Ed Miliband has proposed is designed to address?

I think that's the way you'd open up that space to have that conversation. He and Sadiq Khan are right to say that you don't just hold a referendum. The Tories tried it a few years ago with the mayoral systems in Birmingham and Manchester, they just went out and said 'we'll have a referendum, shall we have a mayor or not?' It's not meaningful for people. It's not about what sort of a country do you want, how do you want it to work, why do you want it to work like that? That excites me, probably more than my constituents, but it excites them too. If you talk to 15 year olds in my constituency, they get excited about that sort of thing. They don't get excited about mayors.

Can you have the same clarity of choice, and ferocity of argument, in an open-ended process like a constitutional convention like you could in the Scottish referendum? I didn't

actually think it was a terrible idea, what Salmond said about having a referendum on keeping the Lords. You need a sharp focus to open up all those questions underneath.

The trouble with keeping the Lords is that I can't imagine anyone would vote to keep it. We know it's ridiculous, we know it doesn't work; although it is good for democracy in lots of ways and there's a lot of expertise there. When I worked in the charity sector it was where we would go to try and get change; it's still where I go to try and get that debate and get that shift...

It seems to be the only deliberative element in the UK constitution.

Yes! But it's still bad for the country that we have something that exists in that form. There is, however, no consensus at all about what you do next; so huge amounts of parliamentary time is spent debating endless different options, all of which had pros and cons, and the answer was 'none of the above'. The real question you're asking, though, is whether the constitutional convention has life. I think that thing that the BBC did a few months ago was very promising. They kicked off debates on the same day in every region, where they got members of the public, experts, politicians, charities to come in and have a bit of a barney about what should happen next. And it was brilliant – everyone I met in Wigan in the next three or four days had seen it and had an opinion on it. You're talking about things that are very close to home, examples that really matter to people. Try and have a national debate from Whitehall, and it's not going to work. The way to address this isn't to start a national conversation, but a whole series of conversations. Out of that might come completely different proposals, but you might be surprised and find there's actually a lot of overlap.

Do you think that the hope for a Senate for the Nations and Regions is that it could provide a more transparent space for negotiation to go on between different regions?

What it could do is provide some of that equality that is lacking at the moment – providing equality of voice; we don't have that at the moment. That's the gap between a federal system and where we are now. It's really hard to see how you bridge that, but that might potentially be one way in which we could bridge that through a Senate, yes. In the North West, we do have strong regional spokespeople; Richard Leese, Peter Smith, Joe Anderson. You do have some regional figures with a national profile. But it's mainly individuals, and it doesn't feel like a complete democracy, to borrow Michael Young's phrase. It feels like a set of separate individuals, some of which are very rooted in their communities, some who frankly aren't.

But in any case, the region is not speaking with a strong and a clear voice. You could build that through initiatives like replacing the House of Lords with a Senate.

It's hard, though – you talked about opening space in government for opposition towards you, but it's also difficult with the parliamentary timetable, the possibility of coalition, the fluidity of politics now... There's also a basic issue about politicians being willing to give power away. I guess my answer to that would be: it's a long-term process, and there's no other option. We can't roll the clock back to 1997, even if we wanted to. People are already reaching that conclusion outside of Westminster. Times have changed. What's up for grabs is a lot more exciting. It's about opening up politics to people again. You might not always get what you want, but you'll almost always get a better answer than you started with.

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