REVIEW ESSAY

Labour's new identity politics

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One Nation: Labour's Political Renewal

Jon Cruddas and Jonathan Rutherford

ONE NATION REGISTER, 2014

Our Labour, Our Communities

Edited by Lisa Nandy

LABOURLIST, 2014

Laying the Foundations for a Labour Century

Edited by John Woodcock and Liz Kendall

POLICY NETWORK, 2014

Political parties are, it goes without saying, formed out of agreement between members. But to be really successful the extent and intensity of that agreement has to be just right. Too much and a party will have limited appeal; it will be cult-like, brittle and prone to splitting. Too little and a party will attract self-promoting people and pet causes, making things fractious and difficult to manage.

The need for parties to stay in the 'Goldilocks Zone' between too much and too little consensus gave rise in the twentieth-century to a characteristic genre of political debate. Confining themselves within an ideological framework, contenders would use shared terms – such as equality, work, democracy, freedom and opportunity – but with contrasting emphasis, trying to make some more important than others. There were attempts to banish ideas to the margins or to combine concepts in novel ways, creating hybrids such as 'equality of opportunity' and occasionally new words

were added to the ideological vocabulary ('modernisation', 'efficiency', 'compassionate'). In the history of the labour movement such internal discussion produced significant works: Durbin's *The Politics of Democratic Socialism* (1940) distinguished the Labour Party from communism by foregrounding democracy; *The Future of Socialism* (1956) suppressed critiques of capitalism while advancing a modified concept of equality; Stuart Holland's *The Socialist Challenge* (1975) tried to renew emphasis on capitalism so as to draw attention to the power of multinational corporations.

Laying the Foundations for a Labour Century (hereafter *Foundations*), *Our Labour, Our Communities* (hereafter *Communities*) and *One Nation: Labour's Political Renewal* (hereafter *One Nation*) are also exercises in shaping the political theory of the Labour Party by foregrounding some concepts and downplaying others. But these texts feel more ritualistic than intellectual – as if what matters to them most is their form rather than their content. They are demonstrations in the use of particular languages, inward-facing affirmations of identity and loyalty. Tribal feeling matters in politics – and ritual gestures can matter a lot where faith is beset by doubt. But a strong politics requires a serious analysis of the contemporary situation (economic, social, political) into which it seeks to intervene. Of the three texts under review here, only *One Nation* points in that direction. But ultimately it, like the others, is not a remedy to our present discontents but a symptom of them.

First as tragedy

What became Blairism started out as two rather different sets of ideas. One was pure political strategy: the claim that the British people are not very left-wing, that appealing to their private aspirations is the key to electoral success and that one should therefore tack to the political centre. The other was an economic and political analysis. It accepted what Stuart Holland wanted to contest – that globalisation prevents the social democratic government of capital – and found for itself a new mission: the creation of a 'knowledge economy' driven by 'innovative', 'entrepreneurial' and 'creative' individuals. Defining equality as the absence of constraints on entering into, and circulating within, the labour market, Blairites identified those constraints as arising primarily from state regulation, trade union practices and the welfare state. It duly set out to 'reform' all of them. Blairites also saw prejudice (sexism, racism, disablism, classism and homophobia) as hindrances to the release of limitless economically creative potential and so condemned them as not only unethical but also uneconomic. The 'enabling' or 'social investment' state was

committed to cheering on social mobility in the face of 'forces of conservatism' on both the right and the left.

The contributors to *Foundations* are driven by the purest form of this vision (as it was before the corruptions of high office and the militarisation of Prime Ministerial ego) – the Blairism of task-forces and 'Action Zones'. The book consists of eight short chapters (none more than six pages in length), seven of which inexplicably required for their production the combined efforts of not one but two members of the Shadow Cabinet. Collectively they climb to a peak of Blairite banality where they drown thinking in an over-salted sea of upbeat adjectives ('high quality', 'affordable', 'transparent', 'engaged', 'bold').

The foremost concept here is 'change' – almost all of the essays begin with a claim concerning its scale and pace. Change is 'unsettling' and 'dizzying', 'seeps through borders previously thought impenetrable' and 'brings disruption in the status quo' (Creasy, pp. 13, 19, 20). It is moving 'at a frightening pace', 'rapid, dramatic and irreversible' (Woodcock and Perkins, p. 23, pp. 27, 25) and 'faster than many of us can comprehend' (Greatrex and Reynolds, 39). It is the 'challenge' of our times but also the solution. We must 'help ensure everyone can anticipate change, adapt to it, embrace it and, perhaps, even provoke it in the first place' and 'challenge those who seek to suffocate change' (Creasy, pp. 18, 21). 'We must change our approach to business policy' and 'show leadership on the international stage in the face of unprecedented global change' (Woodcock and Perkins, pp. 27, 28). Public services must change 'radically' because 'cultural change on the scale needed does not take root without some structural change'. Consequently, we must 'overcome resistance to change from parts of the civil service'. (Kendall and Reed, p. 32). But 'politicians need to change too' becoming 'facilitators, enablers and organizers' (Kendall and Reed, p. 33). 'Social mobility will only be improved by the whole of government focusing on change, involving industry and demanding reform' (Chapman and Powell, p. 45).

It's not clear who is the imagined foe here. There isn't a political party in Britain which doesn't claim that some things have changed and that some other things will or must change too. But not everything changes in the same way, in the same direction or at the same speed. Change needs to be specified, measured and analysed. In *Foundations*, however, the incantation of 'change' does not emerge from careful thought and analysis; it substitutes for it. John Woodcock and Liz Kendall, write that 'a century of history has taught us that Labour succeeds when we match an understanding of how the world is changing with a long-term vision to improve

peoples' lives' (p. 14). Yet what we certainly don't have here is a sound understanding of how the world is changing.

For example, Woodcock and Perkins claim that 'fifty years ago the most common job in the United Kingdom was employment in manufacturing. Today it is a role in finance and insurance'. No source is given for this striking claim. My source is the Office of National Statistics Business Register and Employment Survey for 2012 which reported that the largest employment sector in the UK, by some distance, is health. It is followed by: retail; education; manufacturing (which employs 2.3 million people); business, administration and support services; professional, scientific and technical sectors; accommodation and food services; public administration; construction. Just over one million people work in finance and insurance. It is not the most common job in the United Kingdom but the tenth.

This sort of mistake is, I think, the product of unthinking rather than mendacity. In my experience people in politics are often driven by a mixture of two mistakes. One is thinking the world to be everywhere the way it is for them – they pulled themselves up by the bootstraps so you can too. The other is thinking that the world is as the politician needs it to be – which is usually a way that makes them feel on top of things and thus able to exercise power over it. *Foundations* has a bit of the former and a lot of the latter. There is much eagerness and enthusiasm for what Tony Blair used to call the 'information superhighway'. Back then excitable gurus were sure that the internet was going to revivify political participation and free us from the constraints of merely social identity. We now know that it is a machine for the manufacture of attention and personal information both of which are sold (at very low cost but in vast numbers) to advertisers. The internet has changed business in Britain by enabling us to be sold many things by corporations that pretend to be not here but in low-tax Luxemburg. 'Big Data' has become a mystical idea – the solution to all things – and in its name government has sacrificed billions of pounds on IT projects evidently signed-off by people who don't actually use the internet. The exception is GCHQ; the internet is marvellous for spies. But for the authors of *Foundations* dreams about the possibilities of crowd-sourced, transparency and accountability outrun any need to analyse the real social and political effects of our digital modernisation and for that reason they can't ask the right questions about it (let alone formulate the answers).

In *Foundations* the imagined feeling of being excitingly in tune with the times isn't just ideological flavouring. It is an ideology. Alison McGovern and Jonathan Reynolds begin their chapter with the declaration that 'at the heart of the progress-

ive view of politics is the refusal to accept the current state of affairs. It's the idea that the role of politics is not to defend the status quo but to articulate change' (p. 35). It's too easy to make fun of this. If the 'progressive' view is simply refusal to accept the current state of things then UKIP – who clearly object to the current state of things – must be the most progressive force around. But I think that McGovern and Reynolds are being very honest and clear. The ideology of *Foundations* really does consist of a big thumbs-up for change – commitment to a half-remembered form of liberal progressivism but not its content; a blind faith in the uniform and forward movement of human history allied to the simplistic feeling that you are either with it or against it. And this is something people in and around Labour think not because it makes sense but because they have to think it. It enables them to imagine themselves as heroic protagonists in a historic struggle, facing down those who would 'imply that they can make the world stand still' (Woodcock and Kendall, p. 17) and brave enough to 'embrace change as inevitable and seek to shape and harness it for good' (Woodcock and Kendall, p. 13). It makes them feel like they still matter.

Love and pride

Where *Foundations* reheats Blairite political economy, the contributors to *Communities* take on its political strategy. Philip Gould's opinion polling told him that the British people are not very left-wing and are focused primarily on individual aspirations. Blue Labour supporters (and *Communities* is clearly in the orbit of a Blue planet) concur with the claim that the British people are not very left-wing. They think that many of us are lower-case conservatives, justifiably hostile to the pretensions of rootless, big-city liberals. But what Blue Labour does (and this is quite often misunderstood) is take these conservative premises and from them deduce left-wing conclusions. Where Gould (and Blair and Mandelson) saw individuals committed to themselves and their families as Thatcherite, Blue Labour sees them as evidence of the natural sociality and solidarity of the British people. And because we are attached to family, community and culture we are also – or ought to be – hostile to the corrosive individualism prevalent in contemporary economic and social life. Blue Labour thus thinks of itself as building a politics not on individual self-interests but on actually-existing social relationships in families, workplaces, localities and religions. This is the basis of a 'relational politics' (popular across the Labour spectrum from Compass to Progress via the IPPR) that aims to scrape away the corrosion of society and to reveal beneath the shining brass of the common good.

Community Organising guru Arnie Graf, in the foreword to *Communities*, describes this as 'a new politics of conversation, engagement and action' and in what follows ten Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (brought together by Lisa Nandy, MP for Wigan) demonstrate their commitment to it. *Foundations* and *Communities* meet at this point – both demand a more active, participatory and involved politics. But *Communities* feels different since its demand comes not from delight at the inevitable forces of future change but from anxiety about past failures and the sense that, as Nandy writes, for candidates today it is a 'challenge not just to be elected but to be heard, to win trust in the communities they seek to represent and restore their faith in politics'. Some of this floats on generic New Labour flatulence – 'changing times demand a changed response, with a state that works alongside communities as a partner, drawing on the potential people have, not the problems they pose ... a government with a plan to match the ambition and energy they possess' – but mostly the style is very different to *Foundations* (and I think that style can make a difference).

Filled with personal testimony and exemplary sentimental anecdote the essays in *Communities* follow the script of the community organising movement – they are stories of political awakening and thumbnail sketches of those to be saved by politics. Where the contributors to *Foundations* want to convince themselves that they are in harmony with the cutting-edge of Creative Entrepreneurial Britain, those writing in *Communities* need to feel that they are singing alongside the decent-minded people in the local voluntary choir.

I quite like this sort of thing. After so many years of being chivvied by avaricious PPE graduates to be more like Richard Branson, it's great to find politicians talking about lives a bit more like those most of us actually live. But there is a problem. Some people – cynical bourgeois like me – find the community organising movement a tiny bit cult-like. It's the way they make you sit down 'one-to-one' and confess something personal, the original trauma which brought you there. Such things often are part of one's political consciousness – but so too are ethical or intellectual conviction and 'objective interests'. My worry is that an emphasis on sharing feelings gives rise to an inward-looking community – potentially a powerful and united social actor but also likely to hide from itself uncomfortable intellectual truths, real ethical dilemmas and actually-existing contradictory interests. And that brings us to *One Nation*.

Stuck in a groove

The status of this text is unclear. It is a report from the Labour Party Policy Review and credits many of the individuals and organisations involved (including – full disclosure – *Renewal* and its current editor). Yet this is not an official publication of the Labour Party. There is no introductory endorsement from the leader. That may mean that *One Nation* doesn't get taken as seriously as it should. For while it does employ some of the usual tropes about change it also contains the outlines of an actual political analysis.

That analysis starts from the proposition that the political project of the New Right is now exhausted and has 'no theoretical insight capable of extracting the country from the mess its own orthodoxies have created'. *One Nation* offers instead a politics rooted explicitly in the ideas of Karl Polanyi: a critique of the intrusion of the market into social relations and a demand for strengthened 'intermediate' institutions to protect the latter from the former. Polanyi described the historical phenomena of a 'double movement' in which society, enclosed by the market, reasserted itself. *One Nation* argues that the Labour Party ought to see itself as aligned with just such a 'counter-movement' of the sort that once built 'popular movements of collective self-help and improvement: the building societies, mutuals, burial societies, holiday clubs, food cooperatives, and the trade unions which gave working people dignity and more control over their lives' (p. 31).

However, these propositions ultimately rest not on an analysis of present-day political reality but on a series of very broad ethical and value claims. Those values are allegedly British values – 'a love of family, and willingness to live and let live' as well as 'the virtues of fairness, responsibility and duty to others'. 'We believe', Cruddas and Rutherford write (and it is unclear if this 'we' is them or the British), that 'the heart of politics is individuals and their families, the work they do and the places they belong' (p. 16). Elsewhere, Cruddas and Rutherford explain: 'There is no 'I' without first a 'we' that is forged out of family, culture and society' (p. 31).

Cruddas and Rutherford claim that this position is in harmony with the traditions of the British left and specifically with the part of it that was 'squeezed out of national debate by orthodox Marxism and the social democracy of Anthony Crosland'. Theirs, they say, is another third way, identified with the New Left. I am not convinced. At one point they write:

> Democracy starts with the self-interest of individuals, groups and classes, and the tensions and conflicts between them. Its practice is to bring interests

> together to face one another and to establish communication. In this activity, a relationship is made and then a group and a political endeavour forms in which each person is given recognition by the other. By granting our recognition to others, and so giving them esteem, we establish a good that is held in common. This allows a reconciling of estranged interests to begin, such that they become accountable to one another. It will not happen of its own accord. It cannot be administered or managed, it has to be built and sustained in dialogue through conflict. (p. 34)

A moral theory of civil society in which conflict is recognised only to be magically resolved by the power of communicative reason is what comrades might once have denounced as an Hegelian regression. Thankfully we don't now say such things that often. But the fact remains that this moral philosophy is inadequate if one is seeking to understand the nature of present-day conflicts between social interests in a world where some have entrenched, institutionalised and vast power which they use to exploit others and in which communication itself has been very effectively commodified. The wealthy and powerful recognise the powerless perfectly well and know that 'reconciliation' means giving up wealth and power. They are not about to do so without a fight. Politics needs ethics and idealism. It also needs realism and a capacity rigorously to analyse the forms, locations and imbalances of power in present day society. On that basis, one can devise a politics of response. Without such an analysis one risks succumbing to illusion and looking at the world in such a way that it reflects back at one, pleasingly, one's own moral presuppositions.

One Nation is good at being honest about some aspects of where we are: 'A country scarred by dispossession', in which 'people have been driven from secure, full-time work into precarious, badly paid jobs' and the inhabitants of once great industrial regions will 'die sooner, spending more of their shorter lives with a chronic sickness' (p. 23). Such clarity is a welcome change from new-economy boosterism that refuses to draw the dots between under-development in one region and the systematic acquisition of wealth and power by another. If more politicians would articulate such criticism, more of them would be popular. Cruddas and Rutherford state plain truths when they declare that our economy is 'dominated by an over–powerful financial sector' in which 'football clubs, power-generating companies, airports and ports, water companies, rail franchises, chemical, engineering and electronic companies, merchant banks, top-end houses and other assets have been sold off to foreign ownership' (pp. 20-1).

But *One Nation* doesn't always stick with the courage of such convictions. Before long Cruddas and Rutherford are finding that, looked at in the right way, the new economy is in fact a blue economy. At one moment denouncing the private concentration of wealth, at another they are celebrating it, in the belief that a 'shift to a services economy is flattening out old, hierarchical command and control structures, and production is becoming more networked and disorganised' (p. 19) – opening the way to 'a future of invention and wealth creation' based on the internet and which just happens to share the Blue Labour sensibility. It is about feelings: 'Radical innovations in the generation, processing and transmission of information are modernising the whole base of our economy ... intangible assets of information, sounds, words, symbols, images, ideas, produced in creative, emotional and intellectual labour...' (pp. 24-5). It is also relational and hostile to the Fabian state. The new economy 'uses teamwork and it creates relationships with consumers to co-invent new products, ideas and cultural meaning. Central government, big bureaucracies and corporations, faced with complexity and unpredictability, are all losing the power they once had to shape the world in their image. Their hierarchies and bureaucratic structures cannot keep up with our fast-changing society' (p. 27).

The problem, as I see it, is that *One Nation* is founded on an error – the proposition that the New Right project is exhausted. The image of Thatcher may be faded but it was just a poster on the door that opened onto the British Road to Neo-Liberalism: the aggressive use of the state to regulate society in the interests of the economy; the refinement of mechanisms for the disciplinary management of the population; reduced regulation of the powerful; redistribution from the have-nots to the already-have-a-lots. That is what Thatcherism introduced and what Blairism stabilised. We need someone to oppose it. But in promoting all that anti-state, empowered individual and crowd-sourcing new economy ad-speak, Labour people are being the change the ruling class wishes to see in the world.

That is why parts of *Foundations*, *Communities* and *One Nation* are indistinguishable from the arguments of the neo-liberals. Michael Gove, in a 2009 lecture to the Sir John Cass Foundation, spoke of his conviction that we live in a 'post-bureaucratic age' of transparency, easy access to information about performance and costs, and empowered individuals forming 'open source' networks, and in which social democracy has no place. Similarly, Douglas Carswell, now famous as UKIP's first MP, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* in 2012, celebrated the internet as 'a collective endeavour, without any central directing authority. It makes collective action and intelligence, free from any directing authority, possible on a size and scale that was

previously impossible. Collectivism without the state – the dream of every anarchist in history – begins to seem possible, practical and mainstream'.

Anyone who works in a large organisation (especially a public one) knows that this is pure fantasy. New economy management is as top-down as it gets; new technologies have provided means to refine and target the micromanagement of 'performance' (disguised as 'accountability') in ways that melt the heart of every power-hungry bureaucrat. And elsewhere (whether scanning their own shopping or submitting content to Buzzfeed) the new economy makes consumers not into partners but unpaid producers. And what does any of it have to do with all the people working in care-homes, the building trade and so on? What does it have to do with them? When Cruddas and Rutherford claim that, 'in the new economy, successful political organisations – like successful companies – will resemble networks rather than machines, capable of responding to people's needs for meaningful social connection, reciprocity and trust' what workplace are they thinking of?

Gove and Carswell are Conservatives committed to the value of inequality. The authors of *One Nation* are not. But the latter are trapped within a vision of the present created by their opponents. And so their policy prescriptions – some of which are perfectly agreeable – are nevertheless dispiriting revisions. Labour, they explain, should support the work of the Government Digital Service 'because the internet can distribute control and we can use it to push power out to the people who know best how to use it'. There should be a British investment bank, local banking to support local development, devolution to cities, vocational education from fourteen. These are fine things. They could have profound effects. But how much do they matter when – at the behest of the purveyors of what Polanyi called the 'fictitious commodity' of money – state spending will be restricted. 'Judgments about capital spending will be based on evidence and reflect economic realities…', explain Cruddas and Rutherford (p. 37), painfully half-heartedly. 'We will begin renewing our country with foresight and in a framework of reform and financial prudence', they add. We all know why they think they have to say that. We all know who they are saying it for. And we all know that it isn't for us.

Conclusion

Twenty-first century party-political theory draws on an ever-shrinking vocabulary, shared by a dwindling number of people. Neo-liberalism has transformed the scope and scale of collective action, including that of government, taking its words from it and directing its energies away from the regulation of market activity and onto the

regulation of society for markets. Social democratic parties throughout Europe (until the rise of Syriza and Podemos) accepted these constraints and turned their politics into a kind of endless exhortation of people to be better, smarter and nicer to each other. They have been aware of the great imbalance of power in our society and economy, and also of its deleterious and destabilising effects. But, uncertain of how to exercise the kind of force that might rebalance things, they cast around for someone else who might do it – the social entrepreneurs, the online crowd, the community – someone with whom they might 'partner'.

But why would these people partner with Labour? What does it offer them that they can't get for themselves? The answer – which in different ways all three texts give – is this: a grand tradition, a direct and noble blood-line within the progressive and labour movement. What this is, is a kind of identity politics and reading these pamphlets it feels at times as if – like many other post-modern cultural communities – Labour members simply want 'recognition' from others and affirmation of their belief that they are at the forefront of history and part of a liberating force representing the outsiders and keepers of the flame of 'hope'. As national and world politics once again reveals itself as a brutal conflict of interests, we find in these pamphlets a party looking – very hard – for meaning, value and motivation (and looking in the wrong places – in a fondly remembered past and a fantasised future). What we don't find is a hard look at the present – the kind of sociological, economic and cultural analysis that might enable us to see clearly the predicament we are in, its causes and the politics the situation demands.

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