

# EDITORIAL

## Party, place and politics

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Politics and society have become radically estranged from one another in modern Britain. The intermediary and civil society institutions that have traditionally connected people and politics – including the trade union movement, local government and associational life more broadly – have been gradually breaking down. As members of the University of Southampton’s research project on ‘anti-politics in Britain’ observe in this issue, there never really was a golden age of faith in British democracy: popular scepticism of the political process has been significant since at least the Attlee years. But anti-politics has intensified recently, and one way in which it has manifested itself is in the geographical fractures that have emerged in the British political system, particularly since devolution.

At the time of writing – in the immediate aftermath of the local and devolved elections – much is unclear. These seem to have been genuinely local elections in many places: driven by local issues, local successes, local failures, local identities. This means that it is not easy to relate the results to a national picture. And the elections also took place at a time when both the Tory Party and the Labour Party have been riven by division, with effects that are hard to analyse. But it is fair to say that Labour’s fortunes were at best mixed.

In Scotland the results are at their worst, with Labour driven into third place behind a resurgent Tory party. In London, as in other major conurbations, the results are better: Sadiq Khan resoundingly defeated a mayoral campaign from Zac Goldsmith characterised by tactics so unpleasant they drew fire from key Tories. In the aftermath of defeat, Baroness Warsi argued Goldsmith’s campaign had damaged the entire party’s reputation on race relations.<sup>1</sup> But Khan’s campaign was resolutely about the candidate himself, his narrative and his priorities, largely eschewing reference to Jeremy Corbyn on the doorstep and in the media. Labour won in London because London is succeeding economically, is confident about multicultur-

alism, and is consistently being failed by Tory policy – housing policy most of all, for London’s housing market works for fewer and fewer people every year.

Labour also won in London because Khan was a candidate with a clear image and a strong narrative: principled, dynamic, representing the future. His victory has reignited a national conversation about multiculturalism, integration, and what it means to be a British Muslim. In this issue, the leading contemporary theorist of multicultural society, Tariq Modood, adds his contribution: a revealing conversation concerning his long experience in British public life, and the challenges and possibilities of an evolving multiculturalism.

The council results in England are harder to read. Labour held onto its majority in Southampton, a Labour holdout in an area of the south dominated by the Tories, while losing support in some of its more traditional heartlands. Southampton is the sort of place that might have been included in Giles Radice’s 1992 *Southern Discomfort* study for the Fabian society: relatively affluent, with substantial numbers of homeowners and suburbanites.<sup>2</sup> This is precisely the sort of place where Labour needs to be winning. The results in Southampton show that a strong local party and a good performance in local government can deliver results. But these successes need to be knitted together into something that translates on a national level: they need to help legitimise a radical, transformative, left project.

In this context, Jeremy Corbyn’s recognition that ‘we are not yet doing enough to win in 2020’ is a welcome and realistic one.<sup>3</sup> The spirit of the ‘new politics’ requires such openness and self-criticism, as well as dialogue with others. A livelier and more democratic atmosphere in the party requires more than new policies from the centre and more than blind adherence to a small group of politicians in Westminster, based on a one-off ‘mandate’. As Lea Ypi and Jonathan White eloquently argue in this issue, partisanship gains its emotional and ideological power from a sense of commitment in historical time, and from the possibility of having a voice in collective activity. Labour cannot be seen as simply a vote-winning machine, but nor is it (and nor should it be) be a homogenous body of supporters rallying behind the leadership of the day.

This issue explores the consequences of anti-politics for the left, and the two major strategies – the revival of local government, and the rebirth of Labour as a mass-membership party – that have been put forward as partial solutions to the problem. As previous *Renewal* editorials have suggested, these solutions (in differing forms) have attracted support from across the party and movement. Yet there is little sense of what they might look like in practice, or what might be the concrete obstacles to national political regeneration through local action.

As John McDonnell has suggested, Labour should be a party that uses central government to devolve power, wealth and decision-making to local government, to social movements, and to grassroots organisations. In this issue, Matthew Brown talks eloquently of the radical new economic and social model local government in Preston is delivering. This is a crucial part of the future for Labour. Labour councils and activists are democratising our society and economy from the bottom up in many places across Britain. If the national party can work in tandem with effective and innovative local authorities at the regional and national level, the party can start to rebuild confidence in British social democracy. As Craig Berry has argued:

The argument on austerity will not be won by academic macroeconomists dusting off their Keynesian textbooks. It must be confronted as it exists in actuality, not theory, and this means constructing a progressive politics of place.<sup>4</sup>

Serious attempts to promote local routes to the revival of social democracy, however, need to acknowledge its very real limitations. Persistent differences in turnout between UK-wide and other elections do not breed confidence in the democratising potential of decentralisation. As Oliver Escobar argues in this issue, the increasing use of innovative participatory democracy offers one route to overcoming the challenge of ‘anti-politics’. Nor can national politics be neglected. Unlike American states and municipalities, British local government does not exist as a matter of constitutional right, but as a set of privileges bestowed by a distant Crown-in-Parliament. As things stand, we live with a highly centralised set of constitutional arrangements. When Thatcher wanted to abolish the GLC in the 1980s, nothing could stand in her way. After 1986 London endured over a decade without the sort of central authority which could take big decisions about coordination and redistribution of resources. Victory at the centre remains a precondition for sustained renewal of cities, counties, regions and nations.

**James Stafford** and **Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite** are the co-editors of *Renewal*.

*In April we launched a Renewal blog, to continue the debate online; on the blog you can also read (in advance of its publication in the journal later this year) George Morris’s analysis of the Thatcherite ideological lineage of Universal Credit, and how it might be reformed.*

*Potential contributors to the blog or the journal should contact us on [editorial@renewal.org](mailto:editorial@renewal.org). We welcome standalone pieces or responses to articles or blogs, on a wide range of topics relating to left-wing policy and politics, from members of the labour movement and the left more broadly.*

## Notes

- 1 'Zac Goldsmith criticised by former Tory Minister Baroness Warsi over Sadiq Khan 7/7 London Terror Bus Image', *Independent*, 01.05.2016.
- 2 Giles Radice (1992), *Southern Discomfort*, Fabian Society.
- 3 'Labour not doing enough to win 2020 general election, says Jeremy Corbyn', *Guardian*, 09.05.16, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/09/jeremy-corbyn-labour-not-doing-enough-to-win-2020-general-election>.
- 4 Craig Berry (2016), 'The Real New Politics of Post-Crisis Britain', *SPERI Comment: The Political Economy Blog*, <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2016/02/18/the-real-new-politics-of-post-crisis-britain-part-i/>.