Ideas worth fighting for

Lisa Nandy MP

Labour's new economic consensus is based on taking power away from capital and returning it to our communities.

I spent much of this summer on a picket line in my home town of Wigan, alongside porters and cleaners at our local hospital whose jobs were being outsourced to the private sector. They were fighting against that, not just because of their jobs or their wages, or the terms and conditions of those who would come after them, but because they believed in the National Health Service. They were proud to work for it. When we started the battle I said to them: 'We will win this – and I don't know how long it will take and I don't know how tough, in all honesty, it will get, but I will stand with you and I will fight with you. We will stand together, and we will win together.'

We stood on that picket line all summer – and we won. The Hospital Trust backed down. Those porters and cleaners didn't just defend their jobs: they defended a principle, an idea. That idea is about the common good. It's about solidarity. It refuses to allow hospital workers' interests to be separated from the interests of patients. It refuses to allow our NHS to be put up for sale.

This reminds me of the strap-line of my favourite museum, the People's History Museum in Manchester: 'There have always been ideas worth fighting for'. For all of the upheaval, all of the change, all of the disruption in the world over the past few years – some of it positive, much of it negative – it feels to me that we're in a moment now when those ideas are up for grabs again. The parameters of politics, and of political debate, that have been so constrained during my lifetime, have been bust wide open. And in the 2017 election, when Jeremy Corbyn came out fighting, when he refused to accept the rules of the game, that felt like a really exciting moment.

The violence of indifference

So we are here, now, discussing fundamental ideas. And one of those ideas has got to be the basis of the economy. We've got an economy in this country that we work for, we *grind* for, every single day. We work for it: it doesn't work for us. I think increasingly, across this country, there's a recognition now that this has got to change. Over the last two and a half centuries we've seen unprecedented growth across the world, but the rewards of that growth have gone into fewer and fewer hands. What does that mean? It means that some of us in this country – and four and a half million of our children – have nothing.[1]

What's more, when the market rules, people living in poverty don't even count. Markets don't see citizens, they see consumers. People without purchasing power are basically invisible. They're denied the right to live and participate in society. Bobby Kennedy put it like this, some fifty years ago:

> There is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly ... as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay. The ... slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books and homes without heat in the winter.[2]

That indifference is characteristic of the nature of the institutions that we've allowed to prevail in this country. And it has led to an unprecedented share of wealth going to the top 10 per cent, who now have 290 times the assets of the 10 per cent at the bottom.[3] As George Osborne's wrecking ball of austerity has crashed through our communities, piling cuts upon cuts, what we've seen is that public debt has been passed on to individuals. Private debt has gone through the roof. We are denied the basis of security, optimism and hope for the future. Some people have appropriated those things for themselves, and millions of us are therefore deprived of them, every day.

Setting up the Centre for Towns has helped us to understand that that wealth hasn't just become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands: it has also become concentrated geographically too. Whole areas of the country have been written off. Huge damage has been done. The result is that millions are denied the basics of a good life. What is socialism, unless it is, as Caroline Lucas put it to me, the ability to live richer, deeper, larger lives?

A nation of warehouses

This is what accounts, I think, for the anger in towns like Wigan, my own constituency, which overwhelmingly voted to Leave in the referendum. The vote was a rejection of a political settlement that has concentrated wealth, opportunity and

economic power in cities, and left millions of the rest of us – some of us in those cities, and many of us elsewhere – out of the picture.

The roots of this can be traced back quite some way. In 2005, Tony Blair notoriously told Labour conference:

> The character of this changing world is indifferent to tradition. Unforgiving of frailty. No respecter of past reputations. It has no custom and practice. It is replete with opportunities, but they only go to those swift to adapt, slow to complain, open, willing and able to change.[4]

But what of those areas unable to change? What of those parts of the country where between a third and a half of adults have no skills or qualifications at all? I'll tell you what happened. We built them warehouses, gave them delivery jobs – and the well-paid opportunities went elsewhere.

These are jobs that give neither purpose, security, dignity or hope. The kids that could grasp the opportunities opened up by the last Labour government moved away. They went to university: often as the first in their family to do it. But when they looked back they found that there was nothing to return to home to. It's hard to describe the anger that that has been caused, in many towns across this country, by families being split apart by a series of choices that we made. These are close communities undone. These are our choices, not theirs. Who said that people had to choose between home, love, family – and work.

As towns aged, as those good jobs disappeared, and cities became younger, we saw the working-age population going through the floor in many of those areas, and the spending power disappearing. All of the problems that people like Rebecca Long-Bailey and John McDonnell are rightly grappling with – the loss of high-streets and community pubs, and banks, and libraries, and bus networks, which have been decimated across this country – have their roots in this one decision to remove those good jobs and that spending power from communities and not replace it with anything else. The basics of a shared life, the beating heart of our communities, the arteries of our local economies: gone.

The power of capital

When people look to us in politics to change this, quite often they're astonished to discover that we can't. The power lies with capital. It determines the houses that are built. It determines how much we produce, and the amount that we pay, the shape of the labour market and life at work. All these decisions now lie outside the political sphere altogether. No wonder, then, that so many people across this country sense what Bernie Sanders told us in his primary campaign: the system is rigged.

What's more damaging is how, little by little, these different institutions have allowed the values of capital to permeate through society. In academy schools, now, education is competition between warring individuals for social advantage; it has nothing to do with social justice and cohesion. This is a society in which McDonald's is supposedly of more value than the working-mens' club; where a call centre is apparently of more use than a library. The anger people feel about this is right and it's justified. These are strong, ambitious communities, that step up over and over again in times of difficulty. They know that we can do better.

Take Barnsley, where pride in our mining history is palpable. It's just the same as in my constituency in Wigan. Nobody wants their children to have to go and do that dangerous, dirty, difficult work down the mines. But they were proud that it was through our communities' efforts that we powered this country and built its wealth. But now look at Barnsley. The biggest employer there is ASOS, a warehousing company, with poorly-paid jobs that offer no prospect of a better future. Why shouldn't kids in Barnsley get the chance to power us through the next generation, with green energy, just as their parents and grandparents powered us through the last?

Labour's two pillars

This is the first pillar of Labour's economic policy: we need to give people tools to build our future economy from the ground up. An industrial strategy, yes, but there is power in these communities. Where Whitehall sees problems, these communities see answers.

The second pillar: put capital back in its box. The philosopher Michael Walzer argued, in his book *Spheres of Justice* (1983), that money should be 'made harmless'.[5] Money should never be able to buy education, healthcare, political power, justice. In these cases it denies other people power and it does harm to all of us. In the end, this is about power: who has it, and who doesn't.

In government, for all the good that Labour did over thirteen years in communities like mine, I think we wrongly came to believe that our purpose was about the redistribution of wealth. When actually, as a movement, we were always formed to fight against inequalities of power. You can't just take from the top, and hand – with conditions – to the bottom. That restricts people's agency: it closes off their choices. It denies them the right to live those richer, deeper, larger lives that socialists should always demand.

Most of all, it leaves the power elite, and existing power relations, completely undisturbed at the top. This was out of step with our history. From Keir Hardie to Nye Bevan, ours has always been the fight against the inequality of power in all its forms. It is that fight that forms the basis of a new economic consensus for Labour.

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Notes

1. P. Butler, 'New Study Finds 4.5 Million UK Children Living in Poverty', *Guardian*, 16.9.18: www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/16/new-study-finds-45-million-uk-children-living-in-poverty.
2. R.F. Kennedy, 'Remarks to the Cleveland City Club, April 5 1968': www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Senator-Robert-F-Kennedy-to-the-Cleveland-City-Club-Cleveland-Ohio-April-5-1968.aspx.
3. R. Partington, 'Has the Time Come for a Wealth Tax in the UK?', *Guardian*, 4.3.18: www.theguardian.com/business/2018/mar/04/has-the-time-come-for-a-wealth-tax-in-the-uk.
4. T. Blair, 'Speech to the Labour Party Conference, 27 September 2005': www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches.
5. M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, Robertson, Oxford 1983, p107.