Where next for the Green New Deal?

Adrienne Buller

Keeping the Green New Deal alive in the face of opposition, and finding routes to develop it while out of power, will be a key task for the left in the coming years.

Early February marked one year since Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey introduced a resolution entitled 'Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal' to the United States House of Representatives.[1] The reaction to the resolution was sensational, with activists swarming social media to rejoice, while the Republican Party, media and even the Democratic Leader of the House sought to immediately quell the noise by denigrating and deliberately misrepresenting its content. The extent to which, in the 365 or so days since, the Green New Deal has soared from being a fringe activist demand to become a core political programme among opposition parties on both sides of the Atlantic is astonishing.

In the UK general election of December 2019, the Green New Deal (GND) – or something akin to it – stood trial for the first time as an election commitment from a major political party. On the heels of months of dedicated campaigning on climate from the Labour membership, the party's manifesto opened with a lengthy chapter outlining what they termed the 'Green Industrial Revolution' (GIR). The GIR policy programme was as ambitious as it was detailed; it featured innovative policies for reindustrialising 'left-behind' regions with green manufacturing hubs in electric vehicles or renewable energy technology, as well as designs for community-owned offshore wind farms, and a national home-retrofitting plan. The GIR was popular among Labour members, and its individual components polled well among the wider electorate.

Then came the election day, and an historic defeat for the party. In the wake of the loss, proponents of the GND have had to grapple with the idea that the GND failed its first test at the polls, and to ask themselves: what now? The lure of the centre is evidently strong for many. For the climate movement, this temptation would entail abandoning the GND and pivoting instead to support for discrete, technical, and supposedly palatable proposals in the hopes of cutting carbon where we can.

This temptation must be resisted. First, because it is borne of an understandable but ultimately flawed interpretation of the election result. Second, because our ability to mitigate the worst impacts of climate and environmental breakdown will depend on having a solution that matches the scale of the challenge, and is directed at the problem's source, rather than its symptoms. However, the implications of a decision to hold firm to the mast of the GND are not immediately clear. Just what are the obstacles and opportunities for a radical justice-based movement under the purview of a hostile and unpredictable national government? It is to this last point that I devote the most time here, in part because the election has been dealt with incisively elsewhere, and in part because it is the direction of travel in which the essential ideas of Green New Deal points us that will come to define urgent climate action in the coming years.

What happened?

Few would disagree that the climate crisis failed to take hold as a key issue in the general election. A series of pre-election polls showed unprecedented concern over climate change and support for bold action to tackle it, with more than two-thirds of voters in battleground constituencies like Workington and Don Valley stating that climate change would influence how they voted.[2] However, amidst a perfect storm of dynamics including Brexit and Jeremy Corbyn's unpopularity, in many cases this concern did not manifest itself in a decision at the ballot box. And although the election saw a world first in a televised leaders' climate debate, the questions were stale and technocratic, and Boris Johnson declined to even turn up. His replacement in the debate with a slowly melting ice sculpture – however amusing – was emblematic of the lack of seriousness with which the most pressing issue of our time was treated throughout the campaign.

Despite forming a cornerstone of both the Labour and Green Party manifestos, the GND itself scarcely had a hearing. The Labour Party opened its manifesto with the GIR, and framed the document's extensive contents around its plan for a decarbonised economy. However, for much of the campaign itself, the GIR was confined to the page. When it was given airtime, its policies were announced individually, reduced to a 'series of retail offers' rather than a comprehensive plan, and generally championed by Rebecca Long-Bailey, the Shadow Minister for Business, Energy and

Industrial Strategy.[3] This choice of messenger was logical: Long-Bailey led the development of the GIR policies. However, it also had the effect of siloing the climate crisis to a specific brief, rather than conveying it as a fundamental and economy-defining challenge, and the lens through which the rest of a Labour government's actions would be designed and appraised.

This failure in communication also points to a more essential problem, which is that the GIR is not the GND, however often the terms may be interchanged by activists, politicians or the media. Indeed, the GIR-GND sleight of hand is not just an issue of name; rather, it obscures essential differences between the two programmes – differences which should be made visible if the GND is to survive.

What really is the Green New Deal, and did it ever really exist?

The GIR was a suite of innovative and detailed policies designed to trigger a 'green industrial revolution' through a programme of investment in renewables and EV manufacturing; decarbonising energy and heating; and retrofitting the nation's housing stock. The programme was designed with social aims in mind, promising to eliminate fuel poverty; deliver jobs and prosperity to post-industrial regions; support public and community-owned services; tax major polluters; and ensure workers in high-carbon industries helped lead the rapid transition to a net-zero economy. It even made gestures toward a strengthened internationalist approach, promising technology transfers of the GIR's products to low- and middle-income economies.

The GIR included many of the most salient elements associated with a GND – energy systems, green infrastructure and industry. But a closer inspection reveals significant differences from the type of programme advocated by the likes of Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez and the Sunrise Movement, Senator Bernie Sanders, or the original UK Green New Deal Group.

Although the evocation of the Industrial Revolution in the UK rather than the New Deal is the result of differences in historic resonance between the electorates of the UK and US, the choice of metaphor is revealing of the more fundamental differences in programme content, as well as in the analysis guiding each.

The Green New Deal, as devised more than a decade ago by the UK's Green New Deal Group, offered a series of proposals for what the authors saw as the three defining crises of the time: the climate crisis, the financial crisis and the impending crisis of peak oil.[4] To rectify these 'joined-up crises', the authors proposed mass investment in decarbonising the energy system; however, the proposal hinged firmly on tax reforms and, principally, sweeping re-regulation of national and international financial systems.

The US version of the Green New Deal advanced by Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez and the Sunrise movement follows a similar logic, but centres around justice for what it calls 'frontline and vulnerable communities', which span groups including indigenous communities, communities of colour, migrants, the poor, and people with disabilities, among others. The Ocasio-Cortez-Markey resolution notes that these communities will suffer the greatest impacts of climate change, despite having contributed the least to its genesis, and makes explicit the links between socioeconomic inequality and climate justice.

Both the focus on financial regulation and on prioritising frontline communities can be traced to the derivation of these GND proposals in Roosevelt's New Deal. The New Deal programme, enacted over several years, saw a series of legislative changes to rein in the despotic power of Wall Street following the crash of 1929, such as the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933. It also had as a pillar the establishment of several social programmes to combat poverty and unemployment, such as Social Security and the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, while initiatives such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Civil Works Administration and Farm Security Administration sought to combat the devastation of the Dust Bowl.

In different ways, each of the leading GND proposals cited above attempts to build on the idea of the New Deal (if perhaps a romanticised shorthand of it) to establish the connection between contemporary economic and environmental injustices. Just as the New Deal sought to bring to heel a predatory, deregulated financial system that had cultivated a profound economic depression, so does the UK GND attend to the climate crisis by advocating the subjugation of a globalised, finance-led economy kept afloat by the interminable exploitation of nature and labour. The Ocasio-Cortez GND in particular attends to the notable inadequacies of the original New Deal, which broadly failed or deliberately excluded people of colour, women and other marginalised people, and often served to entrench racial disparities in the economy.[5] Evidence shows these are the same groups which will be harmed disproportionately by another crisis, be it financial or climate.[6][7]

By drawing its inspiration from the Industrial Revolution, on the other hand, the GIR became artificially delimited to a message evoking the successes of that time – productivity, innovation, economic growth. Though the historical content it draws on is undoubtedly more resonant among the UK electorate - a not insignificant advantage - by evoking this historical period in a highly idealised way, the GIR lacks an analysis of a problem to be solved. While the New Deal is similarly viewed through rose-tinted glasses, unlike the Industrial Revolution it was ultimately a bold, purposeful, if flawed, political solution to a specific problem. By contrast, the GIR proposes treatment for the symptoms of our ailing economic model – investment in green industry, decarbonisation of vital services like energy and transport – without proposing a cure for the disease itself. It is also worth

noting the success of the GND frame in other contexts, such as the November 2019 Spanish general election, in which the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party secured the most seats - if not a majority - campaigning on a strong GND programme. While many factors were at play, as in any election, lessons should be taken from the party's success in converting a distant historical reference into a galvanising campaign platform.

The GND represents a uniquely ambitious synthesis of socialist and environmental politics, unequivocally linking socioeconomic injustices to the collapse of biodiversity and a warming planet. The GND diagnoses this illness as capitalism - and a deeply globalised financial capitalism in particular – but it is somewhat less consistent in its prescriptions for a cure. End capitalism altogether? For many in the movement, the answer to this proposal is a resounding yes. For others, the solution takes a radical Keynesian approach, in which the government is bold in investing and redirecting economic activity and in redistributing wealth and power in society; and where the destructive forces of finance are kept firmly in check. But even if the exact solution varies between different camps, there remains a consistent core approach to policy, according to which our urgent environmental and economic challenges are indivisible.

This is an argument and an agenda with considerable force, and it's given rise to an incredible wave of optimism, outrage and political activism on both sides of the Atlantic. Exactly how these goals will be delivered remains an open question, but it is one with considerable political and intellectual capital behind it. However, as Adam Tooze writes, the one certainty for the GND is that 'coupling climate change politics to demands for comprehensive social restructuring will create powerful enemies'.[8] So, in the process of establishing how exactly the GND's vision might be realised through policy and legislation, it's essential to take stock of exactly what forces the project must overcome.

What are we up against?

The UK is somewhat unique in the landscape of national-level climate politics. Though its material action on climate change falls short by several metrics, it does enjoy the relative luxury of inadequate action - as opposed to the prominent culture of denial that afflicts many countries. Notable is the UK's establishment of a 2050 net zero emissions target under a Conservative government, with support across the political spectrum. In the December election, every major party pledged in its manifesto to tackle climate change and meet – or in several cases surpass – the 2050 ambition. This sentiment is reflected in the wider electorate, with one remarkable poll finding 63 per cent of respondents supported a 'Green New Deal' when defined as a major long-term investment programme in green jobs and

infrastructure.[9] However, this apparent public consensus by no means charts a clear course for the GND. Rather, unpredictability may be the defining feature of the present administration - creating both challenges and opportunities for action.

For instance, Boris Johnson pledged to make the UK the 'cleanest, greenest' country on Earth before firing the President for the COP26 summit in Glasgow this November, who promptly declaimed that the prime minister 'doesn't get' climate change. In the Brexit debate, fisheries became a symbol of sovereignty touted by the Conservatives, yet in recent weeks it's become increasingly likely that promises to fishing communities and conservationists alike will be broken in exchange for financial services access to EU markets.[10] This constant tumult seems likely to define Johnson's government, particularly with the looming prospects of free trade agreements with the EU or US - two deals likely to require such radically different regulations and protections as to render them mutually exclusive. Here too, the government has given mixed signals, approving Huawei operations in the UK to the outrage of the Trump administration, while loudly signalling their intent to diverge from various EU rules. Concurrently, in the Labour leadership election, candidates from across the party's ideological spectrum have affirmed their support for the GND – in name, if not always in substance. In light of these varied dynamics, it seems likely that the GND will have to contend with at least three overlapping forms of opposition in the UK's coming years.

Co-optation

If Europe's recent 'Green Deal' is any indication, global advocacy on the climate-economic inequality nexus is cutting through. However, that's no guarantee for radical or even material reformist policy. As David Adler and Yanis Varoufakis write, despite its glossy promotion, 'Europe's green deal fails to inspire on all three important criteria: size, composition and scope'.[11] The stark shortcomings of Europe's Green Deal offer a clear reminder to the climate movement in the UK of the ease with which radical ideas can be swapped out for mediocrity, leaving only a name in place. Within the UK, the continued affirmation of the GND agenda by Labour leadership candidates suggests the idea is unlikely to disappear; the task will be to ensure that the lure of the centre is not allowed to permeate the substantive content of the GND under a new leader, and to hold to the fire the feet of any political representative advocating a GND platform devoid of its essential radicalism.

Continuity centrism

In the context of the international scrutiny surrounding COP26 and the growing salience of the climate crisis among the British public, there is likely to be some

degree of a 'more of the same' approach to climate policy, in which targets and rhetoric suggest modest progress, but where substantive action is minimal and markets remain the preferred mechanism. One risk inherent to this is that the GND will fade from prominence in the parliamentary programme as the pressures of five years of Conservative majority rule come to bear. The task in this instance will be to keep the intellectual project of the GND alive, ensuring that proposed climate policies are evaluated and contested based on its principles, while building a practicable policy programme to support the GND's realisation.

A vital component of this project will involve work at the subnational level to design 'local GNDs', for instance among the hundreds of UK councils that have declared a climate emergency.[12] Where national action may be stagnant, localities in the UK offer a vital route to radical ambition on climate change; perhaps more importantly, they represent a means of naturalising the GND by trialling its associated policies and delivering some of its material benefits for communities. Right to Buy was, after all, trialled in Wandsworth before its enactment on a national scale, presaging the complete reorganisation of the British economy later pursued by the Thatcher government. Advocates of the GND must take lessons from this strategy, and convincingly demonstrate the concrete policies that derive from its vision. To date, the relative ambiguity of the GND's policy agenda has been both an asset and a hindrance; going forward, keeping the GND alive will depend on concretising its vision in communities.

Open hostility

A scenario in which the principles and advocates of the GND suffer overt hostility and suppression at the hands of the national government is increasingly likely. Indeed, this year began with environmental activist organisations ranging from Extinction Rebellion to Greenpeace being listed alongside white nationalist groups in government counter-terrorism literature.[13] It is also likely that the internationalist principles of the GND will be tested, as hostility will permeate not just domestic regulation, but also trade negotiations and the treatment of migrants.

One likely obstacle is that the current government is unlikely to rein in the financial services industry – the cornerstone of the original UK GND: on the contrary, there is an emerging No.10/11 consensus for a post-Brexit purge of the 'red tape' deemed contrary to British business interest. Further deregulation of an already unstable financial services industry likely means disaster, both for the climate and for hopes of preventing another financial crash.

Boris Johnson's apparent eagerness to negotiate an FTA with the US is also troubling, as such an agreement would likely sabotage the government's ability to adopt a

number of measures of environmental policy, for example supporting domestic green industry, pursuing meaningful environmental goals deemed contrary to US business interests, or enabling UK farmers to uphold food standards or employ more sustainable farming methods. The omission of trade protections for farmers in the recent Agricultural Bill suggests the government is clearing the way for this outcome.

Finally, the government's heavy-handed approach to migration is becoming agonisingly clear. A reaffirmed commitment to an 'Australia-style points-based immigration system' has coincided with outrage over the callous deportation to Jamaica of up to fifty individuals, suggesting the lesson from Windrush taken by the current government is that they can act on immigration as they like, with virtual impunity.[14] As Harpreet Kaur Paul warns in her piece for this issue of *Renewal*, future shocks from extreme weather events and climate breakdown are likely to be leveraged to punish migrants, and entrench chauvinist sentiment.[15] For anyone who claims the fundamental internationalist imperative of the GND, migration is an essential front on which the climate movement must fight for justice.

Where to now?

The likelihood of an openly GND-hostile government is high; indeed, it seems increasingly likely that the current government is setting course for economic crisis – one which, as in 2008, will leave the relatively rich unscathed, and the poor and marginalised communities to pick up the pieces. The question is not if there will be another crash, but when. The same is true of the impacts of climate breakdown. Extreme weather events continue to shake the world, from wildfires in Australia to flooding in Jakarta and Yorkshire, devastating local communities and forcing thousands to flee their homes. In response, outrage is brewing on both the left and the right, each with their own vision of what comes next.

The last time the UK was rocked by financial crisis, the left failed to implement a clear and credible plan for recovery, and so business as usual prevailed. This time, the role of the GND movement is to be ready – ready with a plan for economic and environmental rejuvenation; with best-case examples of how to achieve the twin goals of environmental and economic justice; and with a coalition of ideas, activists, trade unions, communities and political outriders to head off at the pass both status quo-ers and disaster capitalists.

In light of the three oppositional dynamics outlined above, I argue there are a number of key strategies which advocates of the GND must pursue in the coming years. The first is to look below Westminster, to design and embed the GND in communities. Doing so requires a careful negotiation of the powers available to the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as to local

government. The devolved administrations have varying powers, but in different nations these include health, agriculture, the environment and many aspects of transport. With the recent agreement of a power-sharing deal in Northern Ireland and a Scottish Parliament keen to outmanoeuvre Downing Street, these governing bodies represent a fertile ground for enacting GND policies. Similarly, more than half of the UK's councils have declared a climate emergency, and are eager for a plan. Inspiration can be found in many places, be it the much-lauded Preston model for local procurement; Birmingham's proposal to ban cars in its city centre; Hackney Borough's Rewilding Project; or Nottingham City Council's radical ambition of net-zero by 2028.

However, in this vital turn to localism, the GND movement must also avoid simply turning inward. Rather, these actions must be situated in a much larger fight against a destructive, globalised and finance-dominated economy, in which the UK's actions – as a seat of financial power, host to the COP26 conference, and on the cusp of a new era of trade negotiations – may be highly impactful.

The GND movement has a daunting but existential task: to fight for the realisation of the GND's principles in major international institutions and infrastructures. However, inroads have been made. After years of glacial progress, the impacts of activism against the financial system are suddenly accelerating, with a flurry of statements on the climate crisis emanating from the Bank of England throughout 2019; record levels of divestment through university endowment and pension activism; [16] and falling returns for fossil fuel giants.[17]

Meanwhile, the COP26 process remains in a state of disarray, and global scrutiny of the UK's climate record will be at an all-time high come November. The climate movement must push for the GND to be a core conversation at the Glasgow summit. Crucially, the climate movement must demand that social and economic justice are closely intertwined with climate action in the negotiations, countering the to-date unwavering commitment of the COP process to market-based mechanisms for carbon reduction.

Finally, a vital frontier for the GND and test of its purported internationalism will be the fight for migrant justice under an intensely hostile national government. In recognising that our many challenges share their basis in a destructive global economic system, the GND necessarily embodies a commitment to solidarity with communities affected by the climate crisis throughout the world – particularly those suffering the worst impacts despite having contributed the least to global emissions. The climate emergency cannot, of course, be confined to national borders, and neither can activism to combat it. The fight for migrant rights should thus be recognised as indivisible from the fight for climate justice, and the climate movement must make this case as loudly and as often as it can.

The politics of crisis

In his recent article for *Foreign Policy*, Adam Tooze highlights the 'deeply ambiguous logic of crisis politics': that in wielding the nature crisis to define its agenda, the GND has both imbued the left with new energy while simultaneously raising significant barriers and creating new enemies, from the financial services industry and big business, to establishment politicians and rising nationalism.

The GND is perhaps the only solution available which matches the scale and complexity of the challenge ahead, and yet this ambition necessarily imposes what may be insurmountable obstacles to the GND's realisation. The scale and urgency of the GND is thus both necessary and an inescapable challenge. For the UK, the next five years will be an existential struggle to keep the essential radical vision of the GND alive, while finding routes to effect vital change under an antagonistic national government. The strategies outlined above represent a sample of these routes, but it is by no means an exhaustive list. Rather, to have a chance of success, the GND will require constant innovation, dynamism, and resilience.

Adrienne Buller is a Senior Fellow at Common Wealth and a founder of Labour for a Green New Deal.

Notes

1. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 'Recognizing the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal', 7 February 2019: www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text.
2. New Economics Foundation & Survation, '68% of those in Labour-held marginal seats in North & Midlands say climate change important deciding factor when voting at this election', 28 November 2019: https://neweconomics.org/2019/11/68-of-those-in-labour-held-marginal-seats-in-north-and-midlands-say-climate-change-important-deciding-factor-when-voting-at-this-election.
3. James Butler, 'What happened?', *London Review of Books*, 6 February 2020.
4. New Economics Foundation, *A Green New Deal: Joined-Up Policies to Solve the Triple Crunch of the Credit Crisis, Climate Change and High Oil Prices*, 20 July 2008.
5. Andrea Flynn and Susan R. Holmberg, 'The Green New Deal's supporters should take a crucial lesson From FDR's original New Deal', *Time*, 26 February 2019: https://time.com/5538022/green-new-deal-warning/.
6. Gillian B. White, 'The recession's racial slant', *The Atlantic*, 24 June 2015: https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/06/black-recession-housing-race/396725/.
7. Amnesty International, 'The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women: Amnesty International's Observations on the Draft General

Recommendation No.35 on Gender-Related Dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction in a Changing Climate', January 2017.

8. Adam Tooze, 'How climate change has supercharged the left', Foreign Policy, 15 January 2020: https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/15/climate-socialism-supercharged-left-green-new-deal/.
9. ClientEarth, 'Climate policies could determine next election as public demands action to tackle "greatest challenge facing humankind"', 30 October 2019
10. Ben Gelblum, 'Stormy waters ahead as Michel Barnier explains EU terms for fishing deal with UK', *The London Economic*, 3 February 2020: www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/stormy-waters-ahead-as-michel-barnier-explains-eu-terms-for-fishing-deal-with-uk/03/02/.
11. David Adler and Yanis Varoufakis, 'The EU's green deal is a colossal exercise in greenwashing', *Guardian*, 7 February 2020.
12. 'List of Councils Who Have Declared a Climate Emergency': www.climateemergency.uk/blog/list-of-councils/.
13. Jamie Grierson and Vikram Dodd, 'Terror police list that included Extinction Rebellion was shared across government', *Guardian*, 27 January 2020: www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jan/27/terror-police-list-extinction-rebellion-shared-across-government.
14. Damien Gayle, Diane Taylor & Amelia Gentleman, 'Jamaica deportations "must be halted" until Windrush report published', *Guardian*, 7 February 2020: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/07/jamaica-deportations-must-be-halted-until-windrush-report-published.
15. Harpreet Kaur Paul, 'A Green New Deal for the Global South', in this issue.
16. Billy Nauman, 'Sharp rise in number of investors dumping fossil fuel stock', *Financial Times*, 9 September 2019.
17. Thomson Reuters, 'Goldman downgrades Exxon to "sell", slashes returns outlook', 3 February 2020: https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-goldmansachs-exxon/goldman-downgrades-exxon-to-sell-slashes-returns-outlook-idUKKBN1ZX16I.