

# EDITORIAL

## The end of illusions

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Labour's strong performance at the 2017 general election demonstrated that policy ambition need not be a barrier to electoral success for parties of the left. Yet it also allowed all of us – including this journal – to sidestep hard and necessary reflection about the work needed to build a social democratic majority in twenty-first century Britain. After last year's electoral rout, the future is uncertain. We must face it without illusions.

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**H**ere we go again. Labour members, and other left and liberal Britons who wish the party well (or should do), are going through the Groundhog Day experience of picking over defeat. Some of the mood music – especially about the need for Labour to reconnect with 'communities' through new organising initiatives – was present in both 2015 and 2010. Yet in electoral terms, Labour's position is probably worse. A 1997-style swing is required for even a small majority, and the party will now be forced to actively defend many once-safe seats that are now knife-edge marginals.

Labour must rebuild, meanwhile, in a horrifyingly unfamiliar and threatening political landscape, at home and around the world. The Conservatives have the

means and the ambition (if not, we must hope, the skill) to transform the political and economic settlement of a post-Brexit Britain. Under Boris Johnson, they are little concerned with the mores and conventions of liberal democracy. As it proclaims its post-Brexit exceptionalism, the UK will continue to follow the US, Russia, India and Brazil down the road to authoritarian plutocracy.

*Renewal* endorsed and wanted to develop the radical policy programme advanced by Labour at the 2017 and 2019 elections. There were good reasons for doing so. The circumstances demanded radicalism – and they still do. Amid a meltdown of ‘centrist’ political reasoning and a radicalisation of the right, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell offered policies matched to the scale of the crises facing capitalism, democracy and the climate.

*Renewal* came to see our role as helping Labour get ready for government: advancing a new political economy based on democratic ownership and climate justice, and drawing attention to the broader international and social contexts that would frame British politics. But we stopped asking hard questions about the party’s effectiveness as a vehicle for that policy radicalism, either as an electoral or as a governing proposition. We were no longer preoccupied with interrogating Labour’s position within the British state and the British party system, as we were before the party’s deceptively strong result in 2017. Like so many after that, we clung to the slowly fading hope that a latent majority for ‘real change’ was already in being, trusting to radical policy and energetic canvassing as a miraculous solution to a structural weakness that all of us, deep down, knew to be there.

Moving on from defeat doesn’t mean rejecting the policy ambition offered by the outgoing leadership; although it might mean re-assessing where the party should start in advancing a project for transformative government. In the Labour leadership contest, still ongoing as we went to press, there has been welcome talk of ‘unity’ from all candidates. But if unity is to be more than a defensive reflex, it has to rest on a shared and realistic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the party. This, moreover, should be reached on the basis of renewed trust and understanding between members, trade unions, councillors and parliamentarians of all persuasions.

Labour can begin to make good on some of the unfulfilled promises of the Corbyn years. But it must face the future without the illusions that have long clouded its political judgement.

## **The problem with policy**

The first illusion Labour must dispense with is a belief that radical policy can solve underlying problems of politics, culture and organisation. The story of the 2017-19 parliament is of ever-growing policy ambition among intellectual outriders and the

party base, culminating at the 2019 conference in the inspirational commitments to a four-day week, a green new deal, and dramatically expanded rights for migrants in Britain. This moment in the party's history is powerfully captured by Harpreet Kaur Paul in this issue, in her account of discussions of a global Green New Deal at the 2019 World Transformed festival.

The energy and ideas of party members, however, were not matched by an ability on the part of the party itself to either make its demands generalised and relevant to the country, or to respond with agility or energy to the rapidly shifting political circumstances of the 2017-19 parliament. The result was the opening of a chasm between Labour's ability to formulate a systemic response to the problems of the world and its ability to mobilise and convince the electorate.

## Professionalism and enthusiasm

As Joe Guinan and Sarah MacKinley describe in their article on the strange marginality of 'Corbynomics' in much of the campaign, what was missing from Labour's campaign was a concerted effort to convert a policy vision into a political strategy. Achieving this means reconciling two elusive goods: an empowered and motivated activist base in the country, able to campaign and organise in a fashion suited to local circumstances, and a professional strategic and media operation at the top of the party, capable of coordinating and communicating a national agenda.

In her piece in this issue, Bridget Phillipson MP – one of the many parliamentarians who nominated Keir Starmer for leader – makes a case for appreciating the basics of political professionalism and party discipline, both of which were almost entirely broken down by the combination of Brexit and Corbyn. Labour certainly needs a leader who is a conventionally effective media and parliamentary performer, and who is more capable of managing Labour as an institution than Corbyn proved to be. But a broader culture shift is also required. At every level, the party should be more concerned with developing talent and capacity, and less so about ensuring loyalty and conformity to the current ruling faction: a problem that Corbyn's leadership shared with that of Brown and Blair.

At the same time, however, there is a real danger that defeat and a new leadership will push Labour back into the defensive, managerial crouch of 2015. Labour cannot survive – financially, as much as anything else – without a mass membership, and that membership needs to feel ownership over an ambitious programme to motivate the sorts of grassroots activism and organising that all agree the party requires.

As Cain Shelley observes in this issue, the question of what motivates activists to give up their time to political causes is one that left advocates of 'movement-building' often leave unanswered. Here, the PLP and the membership have much to do

to rebuild trust and find common ground. Dan Hind's proposal for a Constitutional Convention for the Labour Party, set out in this issue, might offer a way forward. He offers a principled and powerful argument for party democracy as a means of developing the political capacity of the entire organisation, rather than as a simple engine of factional dominance. It's a lesson that all parts of the party would do well to absorb.

## Labour's next coalition

Pluralism across Labour's factions, nations and regions will be essential if Labour is to successfully halt the celebrity-media juggernaut of 'Boris' at an election in 2024. The party has yet to master the task of drawing together different social groups in a country that is fractured along lines of place and identity, and where social and local media offer the most reliable routes to gaining a fair hearing with voters.

This brings us to the third illusion that dogs Labour's internal debates: the idea that there is one regional or social type that holds the key to electoral success. For some, this is the urban, young, multiracial precariat. For others – from whom we hear less these days – it is the 'aspirational' 'swing voter' in 'Middle England'. For still others, by far the most vocal in the wake of last year's rout, it is the older English (or Welsh) 'red wall' voter, who deserted in the party in disgust at its stances on Brexit and immigration.

Broad-brush sociological narratives, however, aren't a substitute for the painstaking work of creating and collecting a deeper knowledge of varied local conditions. Nor do they allow us to capture (and work upon) the divisions and exploitation that occur *within* the 'communities' that Labour's leadership contenders all appeal to. As Phillipson also reminds us in her piece, 'places don't vote – people do'.

In this context, Nick Garland's probing review of Alex Niven's *New Model Island* is suggestive. Garland asks what Niven's compelling, quasi-utopian vision of an archipelagic England might mean for a post-Corbyn Labour Party. Rather than fixating on any one group of voters as the key to a winning majority, the party needs a change of mindset. We could start to think of Labour as a patchwork sum of regional forces, rather than a national institution that rains activists and policy nuggets down on its clientele.

## New alliances

Reforming Labour's party culture – rendering it at once more professional, more regionally sensitive and more pluralist – is the first and most necessary step towards making it a serious contender for power. But it's also time to drop a further illusion

that took root after 2017: the idea that two-party politics was back for good, and that Labour no longer needed to think about its relationship to other non-Conservative parties in the United Kingdom. The 2019 result should change that calculus. Liberalism, environmentalism and social-democratic nationalism aren't going away as significant forces in British politics; and they aren't going to be forced into line behind even the most broad-based and conciliatory Labour leadership.

With years to go before another election, the time is ripe for efforts to build up longer-term and deeper relationships between progressive parties in seats held by the Conservatives – at least in England and Wales. Abandoning a reflexive disdain for the Liberal Democrats, and a belief that a left-wing Labour Party makes the Greens redundant, would be a good start. Agreeing some shared demands and priorities for economic reform – a task that could be facilitated through think tanks such as Common Wealth and IPPR – would be a further vital step. Labour, for its part, should empower local parties to decide whether or not to stand their own candidates against sitting Tory MPs, and commit wholeheartedly to the case for democratic reform of the voting system.

As Lina Nass outlines in this issue, Labour's options in Scotland are more limited. For many years, Scottish Labour has vigorously opposed a new independence referendum as a distraction from questions of social justice. For Nass, this strategy has run out of road. A willingness to contemplate a new independence referendum is essential if it is to gain a hearing among the large numbers of its former supporters who voted 'Yes' in 2014, and thereby begin to reverse the SNP gains of 2019.

## The world outside

When Labour discusses defeat, it most often blames itself for its shortcomings. Sometimes, it pauses to consider what its opponents got right, and what it should learn from them. Only rarely, however, is it able to locate failure in a broader structural context. The final illusion Labour must dispense with is that it is the master of its own fate.

Labour lost to an authoritarian nationalist last year; authoritarian nationalism is the ascendant political ideology of our time. But changes in the global political weather could yet work in the opposite direction, creating fresh momentum and credibility for left and liberal politics here.

If, in the coming months and years, we see successes for the Democrats in the US and the Greens in Germany, we must champion them and associate ourselves with them; just as we should be in close dialogue with the Spanish PSOE (who campaigned, as Adrienne Buller writes in this issue, on the Green New Deal) and Scandinavian comrades about governing from the left.

These transnational electoral dynamics matter because British politics, post-Brexit, will be increasingly conditioned by outside influences – from Chinese investment to the EU regulatory state, from Russian disinformation campaigns to the US agricultural lobby. It will also be changed – perhaps fundamentally – by economic and climactic shocks. As we went to press, one such shock, the global Covid-19 pandemic, was already having profound and as-yet unknowable effects.

We do not know how and when the next financial crisis, or the next manifestation of our ongoing climate emergency, will occur. But we need to be ready for the prospect that the next election could take place in a context that we cannot yet understand or imagine. That shouldn't be a cause for fatalism. Instead, it should inspire us to develop our resources and resilience, and to get to work on broadening our politics right away.

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