Nothing is inevitable: narrating the Covid crisis

Stella Creasy MP and Karl Pike

While this crisis has accentuated the inequalities in our society, we should not assume the left's political outlook will be automatically seen as the necessary starting point for rebuilding. Elements of the crisis must be identified and a narrative constructed, to show the way to a better post-crisis world. Labour must make itself capable of rising to this challenge.

Coronavirus has wrought destruction and heartache. Loved ones have been lost, livelihoods collapsed, and health harmed. It has also acted as a magnifier of underlying inequalities, to devastating effect. Progressives repeatedly demand 'we can't go back to business as usual'.[1] The case for how and why, though, needs to be convincingly made. It seemed unthinkable last spring, when people all around the country stood on their doorsteps to clap for carers, that six months later a Chancellor would introduce a partial public-sector pay freeze, including for teachers and police. Nothing is inevitable about what happens next.

As with previous moments of crisis, different people draw different lessons from both the effects of the crisis, and the response. The first question those on the left need to ask is why *should* this crisis be, as political scientist Colin Hay wrote, 'a moment of *decisive intervention*, a moment of transformation'?[2] The second, no less pressing, question is whether we are capable of ensuring this moment is one in which our values and ideas shape the work of rebuilding.

Socialists who believe that a radical, egalitarian distribution of power, wealth and opportunity is the best way to unlock the potential of all in our society need not only to understand the times in which we live, but also to win the argument about how to

transform them. The track record of the left in recent decades does not bode well. The politics of Covid-19 are not objective, but a product of judgement, argument and debate; one the left needs to lead if it is to be effective. It would be an error to presume that left-wing concerns – injustice, inequality and the fatality of inaction in the face of such issues – automatically cut through.

We seek to contribute to that debate here. First, we briefly explore how crises are defined. Second, we set out what Labour must do to affect what this crisis *should* mean for the UK; this includes using a concern for liberation to give clarity of purpose; encouraging a lively intellectual culture, including celebrating the value of dissent; and finding ways to bring about organisational change to engage, hear and amplify voices that too often go unheard in our politics.

The elements of a crisis

As the enormity of the pandemic set in, many responded with a determination that nothing should ever be the same again. In March 2020, Peter Baker argued: 'disasters and emergencies do not just throw light on the world as it is. They also rip open the fabric of normality. Through the hole that opens up, we glimpse possibilities of other worlds.'[3] In the last decade, Britain has faced multiple crisis moments: the financial crash, flooding, terrorist incidents and Brexit. The magnitude of the Covid-19 crisis sets it apart, of course. Yet at each point, political life seems to shudder to a halt – and there is a moment in which the crisis and the response are defined.

In the last global crisis, the sudden disruption of the financial system saw normality for thousands of people suddenly disintegrate before them. Systemic injustice meant it hit millions on low incomes, whilst the banks appeared perplexed at a modest one-off tax on bonuses. The Occupy movement sprang into life, as suffering provoked demands for change. Yet the Conservatives won the battle to explain what the crisis was and what response was necessary. There are important signs that some lessons have been learnt from the mistakes of austerity. However, the argument that Labour had 'maxed' out the credit card, successfully set in stone by the right, can still be used to justify swingeing spending cuts and secure election victories.

The 2017 general election showed that, when confronted with a tone-deaf Conservative prime minister, Labour could shift the dial on attitudes to the funding of key public services. Yet, within two years, faced with a downbeat response to its election offer, and the democratic crisis generated by Brexit, the left suffered a wipeout. With Boris Johnson's Conservatives making all the running in defining the election, Labour was once again left reacting to an agenda already set.

During a crisis, presuming that any outcome is a 'given' is hazardous. Should we assume, following the public presence of epidemiologists and SAGE analysis in the

national presentation of the virus response, that evidence in politics is back in vogue? No, is our answer. For that to happen, that *part* of this crisis would need to be drawn into an overarching narrative about post-Covid politics. Colin Hay, in explaining crisis narration, revealed a process 'to *identify, define and constitute* crisis in the first place' (original emphasis).[4] Hay's argument was based on an analysis of media framing and construction of the 'winter of discontent', where different elements of what was happening were brought together and defined as a crisis of the state in late-1970s Britain.

Covid is different in substance and scale, but utilising Hay's way of thinking is revealing. The list of failures, and devastating problems emerging or being made visible during the pandemic, is long. Many of them speak to decades-long problems of inequality, market failure, and a lack of political commitment or proficiency. The challenge for the left is to ensure the need to act on these problems is not lost after the crisis abates – but is part of a post-crisis politics that says *this* is why we should act, now. That *this* is what's important.

Rebecca Solnit has written a great deal about change – how work on power, agenda-setting, and the construction and maintenance of dominant ideas play a role in determining *who* gets to shape the past, present and future.[5] Inspired by recent social movements, she has written of 'new generations ... less bound by the old assumptions and denials. To change who tells the story, and who decides, is to change whose story this is.'[6]

Solnit's words should also challenge the left: following this crisis, whose voices will be heard? How can we empower those whose voices are so often drowned out? From people who came to the UK and found work in our public services, to those living in less affluent parts of our country that have been most severely impacted by the pandemic – these are voices that must be heard, amplified and reinforced. The aftermath of the financial crisis was, too often, an example of the opposite.

The impact of this crisis has not been felt equally. The Institute for Fiscal Studies notes that the years leading up the Covid-19 pandemic 'had left households in a precarious position' economically;[7] Resolution Foundation data shows that over half of adults with the lowest incomes relied on borrowing to pay for everyday living costs.[8] Between the beginning of March 2020 and the middle of April, 'age-adjusted death rates in the most deprived tenth of areas in the UK were more than double those in the least deprived tenth of areas'.[9] Baroness Doreen Lawrence, who carried out a review for Labour on the disproportionate impact of Covid-19, found 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic people have been overexposed, under protected, stigmatised and overlooked during this pandemic' – a consequence of 'decades of structural injustice, inequality and discrimination'.[10]

The education organisation Teach First has warned of the socio-economic divide between schools in acquiring digital devices and online learning.[11] The Centre for

Mental Health has suggested that up to 10 million people will require support owing to the pandemic – 1.5 million under the age of 18.[12] We know services are struggling. Dr Kate Lovett, Dean of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, has warned that 'waiting times could get a lot worse' following the pandemic.[13]

The response from government ministers in some of these areas has been inexcusable. The Education Secretary, still Gavin Williamson at the time of writing, oversaw a fiasco with student grades in the summer of 2020 – worsening stress for young people and their families. And he had no clear national plan for online learning when schools were closed in 2020, while subsequent efforts to prevent inequality in online teaching were piecemeal.[14] Evidence suggests, predictably and depressingly, that educational inequalities will 'almost certainly have been exacerbated' during the crisis.[15]

Attention has now turned to the mechanics of a vaccine rollout – the crossroads between 'build back better' and 'get back to normal'. We are all seeing how, even with hope in sight, huge challenges remain. We all hope that 2021 will be a better year. The question we try to engage with next is how to build a post-crisis politics for a better future – one where recovery is followed by renewal.

Post-crisis politics

How Labour defined its mission used to be simple – a political movement founded on the notion that through collective action our fates could be transformed. Against the cruelties of the free market and atavistic thinking, socialism offered hope through mutual endeavour and institutions rooted in solidarity. As the right asked people to pick a side – and accept poverty and inequality as the price of losing – the left saw that everyone could win when they worked together. In the absence of healthcare or education services, the purpose of the left was to win power in order to use the auspices of the state to create them. Building such institutions was a powerful response to how injustice manifested itself – hunger, poverty, a lack of any substantial educational facility for those who could not pay for it, or poor health.

It has become a cliché, but in the twenty-first century the injustices and inequities which beset society are often more complex. It isn't always obvious how institutions can 'solve' these concerns. The market has evolved its ability not only to cause pain, but also to drive progress. Not all businesses are driven by profit, any more than all state institutions are benign carriers of the public good. In an interconnected global economy, states can no longer insulate their publics from harm – whether wrought by a virus, climate change or economic vandalism.

The nature of inequality was changing long before the pandemic, and some trends have been accentuated: for example, more and more house purchases are funded

through the 'bank of mum and dad'.[16] Over the longer term, recent research has found 'inherited wealth is on course to be a much more important determinant of lifetime resources for today's young than it was for previous generations';[17] and we know from other work that the benefits from inheritance 'will be unevenly shared'.[18] Well-paid jobs are now a necessary but insufficient offer for those for whom property is not part of their safety net. Even when reaching a dream job, there is a class ceiling in Britain.[19]

Greater awareness of these complexities has not always been partnered with the generation of new ideas to address them. The intractability of some problems, and a sense of vulnerability to political attack when articulating policy, has led to a prevailing wisdom that it is better to say nothing and focus on deconstructing your opponent's policies than to set your own course. Politicians cite the need to respect a manifesto process as a defence, and then find themselves struggling in the vacuum created.

This is all the more debilitating because so much of what has been exposed this year should speak to Labour's core purpose. Indeed, some of the effects of this crisis relate to longstanding problems – problems worsened by the political response to the *last* crisis. Others speak to ongoing political failures, largely driven by successive Conservative leaderships. The begrudging nature of the government's move – in a pandemic – to remove the immigration healthcare surcharge for those at the forefront of fighting the virus speaks to the woeful state of the UK 'debate' on migration. The social care sector has been on the frontline of the pandemic, yet remains the scene of constant appeals for political commitment that go nowhere.

Liberation

The left has to do more than say that it is progressive or radical. It has to show what that means for priorities and public policy in a complex world. To be left-wing is to champion the liberation that comes for each individual when all are able to contribute to and benefit from shaping society. Social justice and egalitarianism are the conditions which help make this happen. Inequality and injustice are the barriers to such outcomes. Thus our time, energy and expertise goes into how to liberate each of us for the benefit of all of us.

How can Labour offer such emancipation in 2021, in a post-Brexit world, and when the outlook for the United Kingdom is so uncertain? Asking how to free individuals and communities from the obstacles and restrictions inequality creates, to enable them to make choices that realise their own potential, starts a conversation of possibility with the public that is currently absent from our politics. What follows is not an exhaustive list of what our priorities should be – far from it. Instead it illustrates how, by running *towards* the battle of ideas with liberation as our concern,

Labour could recapture the imagination – and electoral support – of the British public.

Our immediate future depends on those small and medium-sized companies in industries – cultural, engineering and scientific research – whose exports cannot be made elsewhere. The Foundational Economy, or 'everyday economy',[20] provides a sustainable model for economic renewal through supporting the services we know we will be needing more of in the future.[21] While government ministers will wax lyrical about post-Brexit trade, the basics of geography and transportation costs alone should help us find our voice on the benefits of European trade and sharing common standards and frameworks. Far from being settled by the deal the government has done, Labour's offer at the next general election requires deep engagement with and thought about our trade and connectivity with the European Union.

Post-Covid-19, many people will require immediate support. We should not shy away from expanding existing welfare provision, and developing it to respond. Helping people take the opportunities of our growing sectors, where self-employment is so prevalent, means moving to a mutualist model of welfare and learning from Dutch Bread Fund schemes.[22] Seeking to liberate means rather than trying to foist specific jobs or education choices on individuals, we focus on improving their access to the assets they need to make those choices for themselves.

Abolished by the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition in 2011, Child Trust Funds have come of age for the generation that received them, and part of the concept is worth revisiting, and developing. As Gavin Kelly has argued, 'the idea of directly supporting families to accumulate assets still has traction because the challenges that sparked the creation of this agenda ... have greater force in the 2020s'.[23] Emancipation isn't just about money in people's pockets; it will also require tutoring, after-school clubs and mental health support to close the gaps Covid has created. This may not translate into one national service. But only government can marshal the funding and logistics to achieve the outcomes we, on the left, seek.

Covid opened our eyes to the power of technology to transform the workplace – fast-tracking the hollowing out of town centres in the process. Liberation means more than a replacement income. Mothers have paid the price of the pandemic with little public concern, being much more likely than fathers to have lost their jobs or had their incomes cut through lost hours of work, as they cover childcare duties.[24] The only corporate governance action taken in the pandemic by the government was to cancel gender pay gap reporting.[25] Yet the emancipatory benefits that ripple from enabling everyone to have a work-life balance are at the heart of egalitarianism. This isn't just about investing in childcare infrastructure; it's about where talent is underused and why such waste is so economically toxic – reducing pay gaps benefits workers and the economy.[26]

It would also be a mistake to presume liberation is about concentrating on what individuals do alone. The injustices of climate change urgently need a collective plan. Cutting emissions means retrofitting commercial and residential properties and restricting travel choices as well as shaking up how jobs are done. Without collective intervention, such disruption will hit those least able to manage – reinforcing inequality not reducing it. And in the twenty-first century, how we keep people well – not just manage access to a healthcare system that waits until they get ill – should be our focus.

Dissent

The capacity of the left to rethink and reimagine the world to come depends on a culture that not only recognises the need to do this, but can also facilitate it. Yet the left too often prefers a row over personalities and political labels to a debate – removing the capacity to have these necessary discussions.

The importance of debate and disagreement for creating new ideas has long been lost in a fog of recrimination and factionalism. Dissent itself is often seen as a problem, rather than as a way of questioning whether or not opposition to a proposal is valid and important. The appetite for critical thinking was discouraged under previous leaderships at the best of times – and that discouragement has become more of an obsession recently. The need to rehabilitate dissent isn't just about the need to scrutinise policies. It's also vital for the production of them in the first place.

With the record and policies of the New Labour government still much debated, it is understandable that disagreement on policy is often presumed to be factionalism. Past policies often act like a sediment on which the party's current programme rests, with subsequent appraisals affected by people's views on who was leader at the time – not whether the policy was right or wrong. Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contracts have been used by governments of all colours, including the last Labour government. We now know that the companies involved have made excessive profits from the public sector. This is poor value for money and leaves us unable to commission infrastructure projects with confidence. A windfall tax could help recover taxpayers' money, but talking about any such solution is too often seen as either heresy or as damning of all private sector funding. If we can't evaluate policies, or learn from our mistakes, we won't move forward.

Clement Attlee wrote that, for the Labour Party: 'self-criticism is a healthy thing so long as it does not lead to a paralysis of the will … In a party of the Left there should always be room for differences of opinion and emphasis. If the party is to renew itself by drawing on the rising generation, there will necessarily be disagreements.'[27] As Rebecca Solnit's work reminds us, new generations of supporters, members and activists will look at policies differently from those who helped deliver Labour's

programme twenty years ago. And that's a good thing. None of the proposals set out in the previous section will be liberating without being stress-tested to see whether they can work for the challenges we face now – and whether they are radical enough to be worth the effort. In a complex and fast-moving world, our understanding of what social justice entails should always be open to the insights gained from engaging with alternative perspectives.

Dissent keeps arguments active and current – it is not the same as shouting or dismissing the ideas of those who come from different progressive traditions. Dissent is what helps push analysis towards answers, and answers are what help make change happen. They move us from a concern about poverty to a national living wage, from poor health outcomes to personal care budgets. Dissent also allows policy-makers to take risks. Given the vogue for absolutist answers, the increasing risk is that politicians think it is better to say nothing at all than be wrong. This all too often leads to stasis, not social justice.

Organisation

The final challenge Labour must address is how to engage with the country it seeks to serve. There is a mountain to climb. Labour needs not only to hold all its current constituencies, but also to gain 124 seats at the next election to achieve a majority of one. This situation is not the outcome of one poor campaign or one leadership. Report after report has reflected on how the 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 election results were the culmination of multiple long-term trends. Indeed, the Conservatives have steadily increased their vote share over the last decade.[28]

Each election post-mortem has covered a range of contemporaneous and long-term issues for Labour. Less attention has been given to the persistent realities of also being out-campaigned. That is not just about money – although in our current electoral system it cannot be denied that money matters. It's about whether Labour's approach to the public works with the electorate of 2020 – whether, in Solnit's words, we can give 'voice' to the voiceless.

Labour has retained the same manner of campaigning – and communicating – for too long. Tribal party allegiances have been declining for decades, with Brexit providing an additional and dramatic change.[29] Yet political parties still act as if constituents can be relied on to pledge their troth for generations as well as deliver their children's support too.

Labour's activist base is far from representative, and in some vital battlegrounds, including Scotland, hollowed out. A study of Labour's members showed 77 per cent are middle-class, with a bigger proportion of its members coming from the south-east and south-west of England than the East and West Midlands.[30] The

impact of this on Labour's operations is not simply about the logistical ability to run a campaign against a well-funded populist right. It's about the need for a range of experiences, and the confidence to recognise that talk of a singular view of the British public on any topic is overly simplistic in the twenty-first century.

For Labour to liberate its voters means treating them not as customers, but as agents of change. The grassroots response to Covid resulted in thousands of mutual aid groups, reflecting the agency within our communities for social justice. Nurturing this spirit should be our mission – whether helping mobilise activists to assist with tutoring, or finding ways to reduce emissions in every town, village and city. Asking how we can be the platform for the change so many want to lead is how we can earn both people's vote and their voices for our common causes.

Conclusion

Adaptation is not about changing your values, but showing how they resonate with the world today. Too often Labour has run from a battle of ideas to show it has 'learned the lessons' of electoral defeat. That is understandable for a party hammered by four election defeats. Yet without a change of approach, the left is likely to continue to lose the argument. For those who are at the sharp end, the left then becomes a source of sympathy and emotional support but not of social justice. This is true even if the government of the day increasingly appears inept.

Opposition enables talented politicians to do a fine job of exposing the incompetence of right-wing governments who see crises as opportunities to promote pet projects – whether cuts to local government or ramping up anti-immigration rhetoric. Yet the public should be given more credit. For the left to be electable and impactful, it has to be able to answer the question 'well, what would you do?' – not with a list of government failings, but with alternative plans and a hunger for the difference it can make.

At crucial moments of crisis, the left has repeatedly failed to construct the dominant narrative. That happened in 2010 and 2015, and again in 2019, as the election was framed as being about democracy and sovereignty – rather than the state of the nation itself. Labour's 'post-crisis' years have been desultory. Four elections have been lost. If there is one lesson, it's that politics *after* this crisis will not be derived purely from circumstance, nor from meanings which 'feel' inevitable following such a traumatic period. It will be a product of contestation, of competing accounts. And we cannot waste time.

Stella Creasy is the Labour and Cooperative Member of Parliament for Walthamstow.

Karl Pike is Lecturer in British Politics and Public Policy at Queen Mary University of London.

Notes

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