EDITORIAL
Understanding the problem

Alan Finlayson

Two interrelated questions face any party or movement serious about winning and using political power: what are the most significant changes in its socio-economic and cultural environment, and how can it respond (and make changes of its own), so as to ensure its survival and growth? Past conflicts within Labour might be understood as being between those who emphasised just one of these questions: at one extreme a pseudo-sociological reductionism insisting on the environmental constraints to which politics must subordinate itself; at the other, insistence that a principled political will can always overcome all obstacles. Advocates of the former see the latter as, at best, naive dreamers and, at worst, dogmatic purists. Advocates of the latter see the former as, at best, naive conformists and, at worst, cynics with nothing but betrayal in their hearts.

If the present state of the Labour Party looks like yet another iteration of this conflict then appearances are deceiving. What is remarkable about the present moment is that *none* of the major factions is really asking, let alone answering, either of these questions. They hide from both reality and utopia, comfortably trapped within various myths of Labour's past to which they long to return and through which they cannot see the present day: 2017 (when Jeremy Corbyn 'won' the general election); 2007 (before Brown 'stole' the crown from Blair); 1997 ('a new dawn has broken, has it not?'); 1983 (before the Labour Party betrayed the miners); 1945 (of course); 1889 (when church and union joined forces on the West India Docks); 1649 (on St George's Hill).

This is a problem.

Pickled

For over thirty years Labour has been haunted by the spectre of what Neil Kinnock famously called, in his 1985 speech to the party conference, 'impossible promises' and 'far-fetched resolutions ... pickled into a rigid dogma'. These were the kind

that gets 'outdated, misplaced, irrelevant to the real needs', ending in 'grotesque chaos'. But history's ghosts sometimes enact darkly ironic revenge. Kinnock's diagnosis has itself become pickled into rigid dogma. A section of the party now thinks that when Labour loses it is primarily because 'the left' has been too self-involved and committed. Resisting and rejecting the dogmatic ideology of the 'hard left' then becomes an all-encompassing ideological dogma of its own. A political generation which came of age in the mid-1990s thinks that what it imagines to have been Blairism is not 'The Third Way' but 'The One And True Way'. Their political mission isn't overcoming well-organised, digitally dominant resurgent forces on the right and far right but re-imposing on their party a political strategy now a quarter of a century old.

Labour's factional disputes in the 1980s were about how to understand and respond to Thatcherite deindustrialisation and the effective embourgeoisement of a significant part of the working class. Though bitter, they were conducted using a (mostly) shared vocabulary. Today Labour's internal disputes are conducted in mutually exclusive languages. All we have are rigid codes, pickled dogmas and competing fantasies. As Christine Berry showed in a previous issue of this journal, the contending parties, literally, cannot read the words their imagined opponents have written.[1]

This is also a problem.

The longed-for 1990s

If it is to succeed, a political movement must find a way of understanding the forces shaping the world around it – one that is sufficient to give it a sense of direction and a way of riding the waves of change into a harbour of its own choosing. It needs to know which social classes, economic interests and cultural identities are – to use Raymond Williams's terms – residual (perhaps fading but maybe revenants), which are dominant, and which emergent. And it needs to know how rival parties and movements are thinking and responding to these same forces. Then it might know how, where and when to make a move.

The victory of New Labour in the 1990s was, like any political victory, made from a mixture of luck and determination. It was built on strong party management and a focused 'on-message' communications strategy. But it was not a triumph of brand management alone. It was also grounded in an overall analysis which drew on Anthony Giddens's sociology of cultural identity in late modernity, and on the political economy of 'new times' developed by activists associated with the Communist Party of Great Britain. By combining all this, Labour was able to develop and communicate a vocabulary through which an emerging generation could talk to itself about itself: white-collar, socially liberal, individualist and con-

sumerist, not hostile to values of family and community but suspicious of political appeals rooted in tradition, conformity and abstract duty. Blairism connected this vocabulary with political and economic arguments about modernisation, technology and globalisation.

That analysis was sound but limited and the party failed to revisit it in office. Rigid adherence to it ultimately blinded Labour to the contradictory political and cultural phenomena its own politics were bringing about. Some analysts at the time, as early as 2002 in fact, thought that Labour might generate a backlash against the imposition of a globalised knowledge economy, which would be a vehicle for radical right resurgence.[2] Eventually thinkers and strategists on the right saw what Labour was not looking at and found a vocabulary of abandonment and betrayal to which they connected anti-Westminster, anti-metropolitan sentiment, national pride and a very English belief that wilfulness is a synonym for freedom.

As Denny Percheva's article in this issue notes, a newly configured English 'ethnic' nationalism is now a key feature of our political culture. So too, as we see in Hywel Lloyd's piece, is an increasingly powerful regionalism, sometimes with a democratic spirit. A dispossessed generation is online looking for explanations of what has happened to them and of what might be done. And from the volatile cauldrons of the internet, strange political formations unexpectedly bubble up to derail political progress on trade, health and climate. Stuck in 1997, trying to concoct an appeal to 'aspiration' likely to be supported by the newspaper columnists they alone read, New Labour's heirs are adrift. They are relics of a moment just after the end of the Cold War and just before social media, their politics as quixotic as that of the remaining remnants of the CPB or the SDP.

This is part of the essence of the problem.

Post-analysis

Meanwhile, in the offices of the Leader of the Opposition, a political-cultural analysis is being refined and applied. But it is more of an expression of the zeitgeist than a way of apprehending it. It is an analysis of feelings and their symbolic representation, cut off from investigations into the political and economic context of which they are part.

Much of what Starmer's Director of Policy Claire Ainsley argues in *The New Working Class* is perfectly sensible. Who can disagree that to be convincing a politician or party needs to look and sound like its audience, and connect with their concerns? And it is good that someone at the top of the party is able to understand and apply the concept of 'class' and understands the changes to, and insecurities embedded within, the contemporary labour market, as well as the diversity of the

working class. But Ainsley's means of getting inside and on top of all this is psychological rather than political. Quite rightly she wants to see beyond the narrower and more reductive rational choice models of voting behaviour. But in replacing economic rationality with the psychology of personality she substitutes one behaviourist reduction for another.

For Ainsley, group identity determines political behaviour. Therefore, rather than appeal to social and economic interests, statements of policy must 'resonate' with voters' group identifications, communicating a story that is 'tuned into' individuals' values and 'cognitive frames' (p35), and which can 'trigger' the right kinds of emotions in voters' (p43).[3] The core theoretical claim underpinning this is that behaviour is an expression of 'innate moral foundations', and all politics can do is craft ways of resonating with these, 'prioritising symbolic policies that are memorable and tell the voter who the party or leader is'. This is not the place to go into a full discussion of the empirical and conceptual grounds for this sort of theory. Regardless of its accuracy, the decision to explain politics through theories of innate psychological dispositions (like some rational choice theories) confines attention to individual perceptions, displacing interest in things that are vital for a full political analysis: history, economics, political ideas, rhetoric, sociology. At the start of her book Ainsley notes that, 'The changes in society we are currently undergoing are profound, and our politics needs to catch up', and lists these as increased diversity, generational divisions over the role of the state and wealth accumulation and digital technology. But these changes – their origins, nature and differential effects – are not the primary focus of her attention. Feelings and thoughts about them are the concern.

That is necessary information. It is not sufficient. And, sometimes, the need to keep affirming sentiments and feelings – for example about the NHS – can, as Agnes Arnold-Forster and Caitjan Gainty show in this issue, hinder the creation of a politics able to address the ways in which we mistreat our public services.

This problem is replicated in the work of Starmer's Director of Strategy, Deborah Mattinson. Her recent book *Beyond the Red Wall* reports numerous interesting and potentially important findings about how people conceive of and articulate their identity. But these are presented as conclusions, realities to which politics must adapt, rather than clues to help us understand the shifting ground of the political battlefield so that we might know where to strike. For example, Mattinson recalls focus group research in which she asked people who had defined themselves as middle-class to bring in objects which signalled this. They brought in cafetieres and Earl Grey teabags. When she asked those who identified as working-class to do the same thing they brought in things such as a toolkit and hairdresser scissors. Mattinson observes that indicating one's discernment in choosing a beverage was a better indicator of middle-class identity than home ownership.[4] But her analysis stops there, when really it is just about to start. The interpretation treats

the relationship between people and object as direct and unmediated. Yet such objects have places in an extensive semiotic system, which gives them the meaning of 'discerning' or 'refined'. Identification of class status with adherence to 'standards' of taste and discernment, believed to be embedded in certain kinds of refined and wrought objects, is a cultural and sociological phenomenon with a long (and quite well understood) history, inseparable from a certain kind of economic order. What is crying out for analysis here is that those who apprehended themselves as middle-class articulated that identity through forms of *consumption*, while those identifying as working-class employed signifiers of *production*. This might be an important clue as to the economic aspects of our political culture wars.

A political party absolutely should conduct opinion research using all means available and it absolutely must test its messages as rigorously as if it were testing a new vaccine. But such techniques cannot substitute for an analysis. Later in this issue, Lise Butler and Marc Stears debate the problems Labour has historically faced in balancing lived experience against academic expertise. The party's current approach gives the appearance of prioritising 'real' voices, but in truth this is simply another form of abstraction – and one that leaves us unable to comprehend the bigger forces at work. Labour's leadership is relying on a quite substantive non-political and non-social theory of politics which encourages, in a way even requires, the party leadership's thinking to be disconnected from, and maybe even hostile to, actual historical, philosophical or sociological analysis of our social, economic and political situation. And it encourages the party to adhere to a strategy of what has been called 'ideological quietism', which, as Patrick Diamond and Karl Pike argue below, in fact hinders the development of a rich, persuasive political narrative.

This is a huge problem.

Ideology now

This is not one of those times in British history where good politics demands little more than 'minding the shop', keeping things ticking over in line with consensus. These are deeply *political* and *ideological* times. Significant and deep divisions cut across our society and our social order. These are not best thought of as 'moral' conflicts, although they are connected to fundamental ways of thinking about what should be the core organising principles of social and economic order. A wide and messy coalition has been carefully constructed on the right. It is united in hostility to the central place given to the principle of equality in organising liberal and social democratic society, and it is held together through extensive use of online media forums and an endless cacophony of dog-whistles calling people to culture war. The groups in that coalition differ over

the axis of inequality that matters most to them – gender, race, nation, religion – but it's enough to hold together a seemingly impossible range from nativist nationalists to Tory traditionalists, by way of neoliberal globalists, erstwhile populists and unabashed elitists. And the Conservative Party in power, chaotic though it often is, is very focused on adapting the political context to suit itself – reforming the constitution and elections, broadcasting regulations, charity laws, its powers over the production and circulation of knowledge – in ways which will weaken and disperse its potential opponents. It is allocating resources – constituency funding, government contracts and state support – to reward those who show it loyalty and punish those who criticise or oppose it. And it has an eye for issues it can seize on (from overseas aid to footballers' anti-racism) to keep the terrain of ideological dispute favourable to it. This is a significant and serious development in the history of British democracy or, to be more accurate, in the creation of its post-democracy.

The challenge for the Labour Party is to go beyond identification of the 'values' of segments of the electorate as revealed by focus group research. It has to identify potential coalitions of values, interests and identities and take on the role of leading them. And while this will require finding ways to speak about the common good – as John Denham suggests later in this issue -- it also requires the identification of what is to come. For example, some Labour figures are keen to re-politicise work. Jon Cruddas has written about work and the dignity of Labour.[5] The virtues of good, hard work and the importance of security and some sense of control in workplaces are a key dimension of Keir Starmer's Fabian pamphlet *The Road Ahead*.[6] But the analysis here is not well-grounded. The nature of work and workplaces has changed dramatically over the last thirty years, and the ever-more refined division of labour affects our social and economic interests, as well as our ways and means of making sense of them.

Most of us of working age spend more of our time working than anything else. Some of us work primarily with our hands, with tools and machines. Some of us work mostly with processes, rules and systems. Some of us work with symbols that we are trained to organise, order and manipulate. And some of us work with people, drawing on interpersonal and social skills. These kinds of work shape our experience and so also our understanding of the world, and our political judgements. Within and between these kinds of work, earnings vary, but so too do the levels of social and cultural capital with which they are associated. The relationship between these different forms of capital is not simple. Nor are the hierarchies, personal relationships and work conditions they impose on each other, let alone the ways in which these are linked with family background, geographical location and educational attainment. And there is strong evidence that occupation is better correlated with political attitudes and voting behaviour than simply income or a division between mental and manual labour.[7]

If Labour wants to re-politicise work and workplaces, then this is the place to start. Yet, in the places where the political foundations of the future are being laid, Labour is nowhere to be found. It is not leading. It is following, some way behind, a train of events it does not have the tools to understand.

That is the problem.

Conclusion

Politics is a competitive activity. It requires defining oneself against the opposition, having understood the terrain of the contest. That means, in the present moment, shaping opposition (found among all kinds of people) to reactionary versions of English nationalism that organise resentment against demands for equal inclusion. It means also opposing the centralising and anti-democratic tendencies of the reactionary version of national sovereignty, which is excluding a wide range of small business owners as well as the owners, managers and frontline workers of key sectors including hospitality, food production and distribution and more.

Furthermore, climate and environmental concerns regularly appear in polls as a top-three concern for a majority of people. A problem here is that environmentalism appears most often as linked to patterns of consumption. We might say – building on Mattinson's observations – that it appears as 'middle-class', and as the opposite of rooted, skilled and working-class experience. That is a cultural-economic fact that is ruthlessly exploited by those who benefit from opposing policies to address the problem.

But above all Labour needs to speak to people as people who work (or want to), and who work in the kinds of ways and in the kinds of conditions that prevail today. Some people don't have enough work, others have work but are insecure, and still others have work which is causing harm to the rest of their lives.[8] Skilled work – manual, craft and white-collar – is being deskilled and routinised and people feel disrespected. The particular skills and experiences of working people are overridden by the generic and generalising demands of non-specialist consultants whose hastily written – but well paid – recommendations interfere with our working lives on a daily basis. It is here that culture war begins.

Nowhere is that more the case than with government itself, which continues to impose 'costly, top-down reforms' that disrupt and destroy professional skills and knowledge. YouGov research in 2017 found that while 73 per cent of bosses think that they make their employees feel respected, only 40 per cent of employees agreed. Understanding that, and the wider ways in which – from the gig economy of large cities, to the care economy everywhere, from the white-collar public sector to industrial manufacturing – our experience of work is of a lack of power, respect and

reward. People vary in who they blame for that – the liberals in HR, Labour for abandoning them, the greedy capitalists, the EU and so on. It is worth noting that over the last year a sizeable proportion of the population made public, in ritual fashion, their support, respect and gratitude for a section of the population defined by work: in the NHS, in front-line and 'blue light' services. And everyone knows that – as Ipsos MORI confirmed again last year – 93 per cent of us trust nurses, but just 23 per cent trust journalists, only 13 per cent trust advertisers and a mere 15 per cent trust politicians.

Labour needs to be a party of labour in all its variety. To be that it needs to know about and understand work. Not just how people in different kinds of work feel about things, but how technological and regulatory change has impacted, negatively, on working people. And it needs to build an alliance of working people to make things better.

That would be the solution.

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Notes

1   Christine Berry, 'Political economy and Labour's factionalism', *Renewal*, Vol 29 No 2, 2021, pp23-31: https://renewal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/04-Renewal-29.2_Berry.pdf.

2   See, for example, Alan Finlayson, 'What about the politics, Tony?', *Guardian*, 16 June 2002: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2002/jun/16/comment.theobserver.

3   Claire Ainsley, *The New Working Class: how to win hearts, minds and votes,* Bristol, Bristol University Press 2018.

4   Deborah Mattinson, *Beyond the Red Wall: why Labour lost, how the Conservatives won and what will happen next?*, London, BiteBack 2020.

5   Jon Cruddas, *The Dignity of Labour*, London, Polity Press 2021.

6   Keir Starmer, *The Road Ahead*, London, Fabian Society 2021: https://fabians.org.uk/publication/the-road-ahead/.

7   Daniel Oesch, 'Rethinking class', interview by Nicolas Duvous, *Books and Ideas,* 5 October 2020: https://booksandideas.net/Rethinking-Class.html; Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm, 'Occupations as a site of political preference formation', *Comparative Political Studies*, 47/12, 2014, p1670-1706.

8   On the case for a reduction in work time see: https://autonomy.work/portfolio/dat/.