

EDITORIAL

Joining the dots

George Morris

One of the difficulties of editing a quarterly journal of politics and policy is that all of the big things tend to happen in the weeks between sending proofs to the printers and hard copies arriving through subscribers' letterboxes. In the early months of 2020, former editor James Stafford had the foresight to insert a passing reference to Covid-19 at the end of the editorial for the first issue of the year. By the time the issue came out it had become apparent that the whole world had changed.

At the time of writing, it is not clear who will be the prime minister when this issue of *Renewal* is published. The Conservative Party is once again gripped by a paroxysm of reaction, with the candidates for its leadership tussling to establish who amongst them has most contempt for trans people and least care for the environment. In the real world from which the party is so keen to flee, the cost-of-living crisis deepens and the planet burns.

As Nick Garland and Emily Robinson argued in the previous issue of this journal, the ability of the Conservative Party to adapt and regenerate over the past decade or so presents Labour with the challenge of trying to hit a moving target.¹ For the Tories, this constant cycle of self-destruction and resurrection is both a strength and a weakness. As the current leadership debate exposes, Tory MPs and members are perfectly willing to attack their own record in government, as if they were preparing to run a general election campaign against themselves. Exhausted by power, morally and intellectually bankrupt, there must surely come a point where the cycle stops, and it is impossible to recover from their self-inflicted wounds.

But, as various contributors to this journal have stressed in recent years, it is not enough for Labour simply to wait for the tensions and contradictions of contemporary Conservatism to consume it. Given the Tory capacity for self-immolation, it seems more likely now than it has been for quite some time that Labour might win an election as if by accident – not because the electorate long for a Starmer government but because they are tired of the long wastage of Tory rule. What is needed, as

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has written, is a strategy ‘to win power, to govern effectively, and to transform British society and political economy in the long run’.²

Take the case of the left in France, as described by David Klemperer in the present issue. In the past decade, Labour’s French sister party, the Parti Socialiste, has gone from controlling the presidency, parliament and most regions, to the abject humiliation of a presidential candidate winning less than two per cent of the vote. Without strategy, vision or a focus on delivering for their electoral base, Klemperer warns, progressive governments drift and flounder, pushed to the right by economic pressures. There are lessons here for those of us this side of the channel, even if it would be – almost – impossible for Labour to win less than two per cent of the vote in a general election. A Labour government characterised by aimless drift should expect short shrift from the electorate at the election after next.

As Colm Murphy reports in this issue, the annual conference of Progressive Britain (formerly known as Progress) in May suggested attempts by the once-powerful Blairite faction to reinvigorate the intellectual landscape of that wing of the party. In their contribution to this issue, Frederick Harry Pitts, Paul Thompson, Jon Cruddas and Jo Ingold note that the emergence of a defined ‘Starmerism’ has been hampered by the ‘abyss of serious thinking on the party’s centre over the past five years.’ Proudly allergic to many policy developments under the previous leadership, Starmerism has slowly struggled towards the beginnings of some sort of clarity as to what it might mean. But, as Nick O’Donovan notes in his article on the ‘vision thing’, it is not the case that there are no ‘viable ideas on offer that the Labour leadership could usefully plunder for vision-making purposes, should it so wish.’

O’Donovan points out that leaders can’t make vision in a vacuum, but rely in part on think tanks, intellectuals and academics. The co-editors of this journal recently published a chapter on its history as part of the edited collection *Rethinking Labour’s Past*, which was published under the auspices of Progressive Britain and is itself testament to efforts to revivify the Labour right’s intellectual life.³ One of the arguments we make in the chapter is that the ‘problem of connecting ideas and strategy’ that the journal set out to grapple with almost thirty years ago remains fraught, and that one reason for this is limited interest from most political practitioners. There may well be the materials for the ‘vision thing’ available to the Labour leadership across the various traditions and tendencies within the party: what is lacking is, to borrow an image from Murphy’s essay, the alchemical work of translating these materials into that vision.

In practice, that there are few outriders and advocates for ‘Starmerism’ is a bigger problem than the vacuity of some of Starmer’s attempts to assert his vision. But if there are ideas, visions and policy agendas available to Starmer in a way that they were not initially available to Miliband or Corbyn, the challenge now facing the

Labour leadership is to offer the country a compelling vision of what – and who – Labour is for.

Labour needs to bring its vision into sharper focus soon, not only for electoral purposes, but for the purpose of governing effectively. There is, as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite puts it, still ‘work to do’; but there is, as she notes, also a lot of work that has already been done. Responsibility for translating the existing materials into an effective vision for government does not solely lie with the Labour leadership, but also with the party’s activists, local representatives and intellectuals. We cannot expect – and should not want – party leadership by seminar. But if the current crisis of the Tory Party enables Labour to be the largest party after the next election, it will need something to show for what we can hope are the last few years of opposition.

George Morris is co-editor, with Emily Robinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, of *Renewal*.

Notes

- 1 Nick Garland and Emily Robinson, ‘Beyond the chaos’, *Renewal*, Vol 30 No 2, 2022, p6.
- 2 Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘Work to do’, *Renewal*, Vol 30 No 1, 2022, p6.
- 3 George Morris, Emily Robinson and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, ‘*Renewal* beyond New Labour: From the LCC to Corbynomics’, in Nathan Yeowell (ed), *Rethinking Labour’s Past*, London, I.B. Tauris 2022.