Keir Starmer and the Philosopher's Stone

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Progressive Britain, the ginger group formerly known as Progress, has found a degree of renewed confidence and purpose after the Corbyn years. It remains to be seen, however, if the centre left can translate these materials into government.

All politics is akin to alchemy. At once scientific and occult, spiritual and corporeal, it is an arcane tradition populated by strange enthusiasts, willing to jeopardise health and sanity through the devotion of countless hours to poring over manuscripts, bickering over obscure lore, and struggling to forge precious metals from hazardous elements.

I was reminded of the alchemical analogy on Saturday 14 May, as I descended from a sunny London street into the basement of Congress House, on behalf of *Renewal*, to attend the annual conference of the British centre-left ginger group Progressive Britain (formerly Progress). The base metals and esoterica were media profiles, polling reports, policy documents, German coalition agreements, voting slate emails, essays on 'covenants', and speeches about 'values'. But the Philosopher's Stone – a transformative and durable Labour government – was no less fiendish to create.

Is it obtainable at all? In this conference, Progressive Britain projected a genuine sense of newfound confidence and purpose: it is now looking outwards, towards communities, electorates and government. This reorientation has, admittedly, exposed some longstanding tensions and newer dilemmas. But there were also glimpses of the quicksilver that could, if administered at the right time and in the right way, conjure into existence the noble metal that all Labour supporters seek.

Party skulduggery to political sorcery

Once a powerful vanguard for 'Blairism' within the Labour Party, the organisation Progress has experienced a more chequered recent history. At odds with the leadership after 2010 and banished to the fringes since 2015, it has for a long time been preoccupied with bruising and compromising internal battles with the Corbynite left. Recent organisational victories, achieved through its arranged marriage with the 'traditional Labour right' group Labour First, and its child, 'Labour to Win', have changed the calculus. Labour's debilitating forever wars are, of course, never over: the conference ended with a revivalist rallying cry from candidates on Labour to Win's NEC slate. Yet, Progressive Britain are currently reaping the rewards of their support for Keir Starmer's leadership. A transformed Shadow Cabinet, with known sympathisers like Wes Streeting occupying senior positions, offers greater opportunities for influence.[1]

As such, a rebranded Progressive Britain and its Executive Director Nathan Yeowell are now trying to conjure something a bit more positive: a credible electoral strategy and policy programme in time for the next general election. The conference's tagline advertised as much: 'A Programme for Government'. So did Yeowell's recent edited collection of essays on 'rethinking Labour's past', which professed a desire to 'move on from increasingly sterile arguments about the rights and wrongs of the Corbyn years'.[2] With Labour making some modest but real council and by-election gains across England, Wales and Scotland, and showing fragile but consistent leads in national polls, this pivot is understandable.[3]

Present suffering or future promise?

Yet, alchemising an effective programme for government, one that has both electoral potency and policy plausibility, is easier said than done. As the conference progressed, several tensions emerged.

The first was an implicit disagreement over the necessity, and desirability, of an ambitious, forward-looking 'narrative' for a successful Labour election campaign. The pollster Chris Curtis opened proceedings. His findings showed progress since Labour's nadir of 2019 and suggested that voters cared overwhelmingly about the cost-of-living crisis. His argument, to simplify, was that Labour should relentlessly focus on bread-and-butter issues and crime, swerving as much as possible Tory-generated 'culture wars'.[4] This has surface plausibility: inflation has now reached 9 per cent (11 per cent for the poorest), energy bills are skyrocketing, and with union density still weak outside the public sector, wages are struggling to keep up.[5] The recent pressure that Labour's proposed windfall tax on North Sea oil and gas to

support households put on the Conservative government attests to the political salience of the coming economic crunch.[6]

On the same panel, however, was the old warhorse Peter Mandelson. Although full of superficial praise for Starmer, he clearly hankered after a more visionary leadership. Labour, he argued, needed a story about the future of the country: its relations with the world, its future exploitation of technology, and its new, British-based supply chains for growth industries. This was, for sure, a more ambitious prospect. But it lacked specifics. And there is something of a disjuncture between a retail political offer, perhaps with welfarist notes, that hammers the government relentlessly on economic suffering in the here and now, and a poetic, Wilsonian tone that speaks in soaring terms of Britain's bright future. Maybe both are necessary, but they do not gel easily.

The Shadow Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson tried to square this circle in her speech on 'growing up in Britain' and a 'social democracy of hope not fear'. Noting that the country's 'future' was literally embodied in its children and young adults, she listed off a battery of policies: more breakfast and after-school clubs, improved early-years and mental health provision, investment in FE and HE, and targeted funding to tackle attainment gaps.[7] The policies were all sensible in themselves – and echo the work of the Welsh Labour-Plaid Cymru government in the Senedd – and Phillipson solidified her reputation as a frontbench politician on top of her brief. Her personal experience growing up in a single parent family also gave the speech pathos. But in rattling through a long list of specific pledges, Phillipson gave no space for spontaneous applause and received none. She also gave few clues on how Labour would tackle bigger, more intractable challenges, such as Higher Education's dangerously dysfunctional system of funding and fees. There was, in short, not that much of the visionary horizon-gazing that the Prince of Darkness desired. A similar point can be made about Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy's keynote speech. Although it was welcome that Lammy combined Labour's support for NATO with warnings about the terrifying prospect of famine in the Horn of Africa and criticism of the disgraceful Israeli policing of Shireen Abu Aqleh's funeral after her killing, his speech was badly in want of an overarching theme. It probably did not help that, in May, Labour's leadership was still actively shunning the cursed question of Brexit, something that is starting to shift at the time of writing.[8] Lammy's most interesting comments were a robust defence of London against its misleading 'metropolitan elite' image, an intriguing choice by the former (and future?) London mayoral candidate.[9]

I don't want to overemphasise differences. In various ways, Mandelson, Phillipson, and Lammy all appealed to a long-favoured theme of Progress(ive Britain). All were keen to play up the possibilities of the future. Another frontbench politician in

attendance, Shadow Employment Secretary and former Chair of Progress, Alison McGovern, agreed. During an interesting panel on the future of work, she dismissed arguments that technological change was necessarily a threat to job security, autonomy and dignity, and criticised 'nostalgia'. The question, she suggested, was about regulating and exploiting rather than rejecting technological changes like automation and AI. This forward-looking perspective has its appeal, and similar rhetoric was, famously, central for both Blair and Wilson. Yet, a focus on a high-tech futuristic industry also risks leaving many target constituencies cold, or even nervous.

Competence, wealth creation, *and* structural reform?

The economic crisis raised other dilemmas too. In his polling presentation, Curtis also found that voters were most unsure about Labour's perceived economic 'credibility'. That was, presumably, at the forefront of Shadow Chief Secretary Pat McFadden's mind. His speech bludgeoned the audience with assertions of economic 'competence'. Attacking the government for its economic mismanagement, he claimed that Labour would facilitate 'wealth creation' and would be ruthlessly prudent in the next election, costing every pledge to the penny. These kinds of claims are hardly new, of course.[10] McFadden is drawing on a decades-old story, in which Labour tries to neutralise its negative imagery and present itself as a more competent manager of the economy than the Tories.

However, McFadden's emphasis on probity sat awkwardly with the contributions of other Labour politicians. During her talk on the future of work, McGovern repeatedly turned to the example of care work – a badly treated sector, disproportionately employing women and of growing relevance in an ageing society – and argued that power and dignity could not be achieved without higher pay, better conditions, and prospects for progression. This makes obvious sense and looks attractive in the aftermath of the pandemic; indeed, in our inflationary times, care-workers will need significant pay rises simply to stand still.[11] It also echoed the past arguments of McGovern's colleague Liz Kendall, and chimes with subsequent noises coming from Wes Streeting, Shadow Health Secretary, who has established a Fabian Society review on social care and briefed a 'national care service' as a 'long-term' goal. Given that most social care is currently provided by savagely underfunded and painfully disempowered councils, though, there were obvious follow-up questions: with what money and with what governing capacity could councils reward care-workers with the remuneration and dignity they deserve? Few national Labour politicians have forgotten the 'death tax' and 'dementia tax' slogans of elections past. Labour currently relies on its 'four point plan', which would use a 'home-first

approach' to free up some money for training and pay, but that is unlikely to hold water for long.[12] McGovern spoke powerfully, but she might need to have a quiet word with McFadden, Reeves and Starmer.

This tension is symptomatic of a bigger dilemma. The 'competence' pitch plays to Starmer's strengths and has its attractions when contrasted with the current tenants of Downing Street. Yet, it also risks distracting attention from rebalancing wealth and power through 'tackling deep-rooted structural inequalities', to quote Progressive Britain's Executive Director.[13] Many parts of the left have, in recent years, seriously attempted to address the injustices and inequalities of Britain's financialised political economy, polarised by region, income, asset ownership, transport and quality of life.[14] 'Corbynomics' was one major attempt, for which Progressive Britain politicians, unsurprisingly, have little time or sympathy. But there are other options, including the markedly communitarian *Labour's Covenant* (2022), authored by Labour Together's Jonathan Rutherford, which drew on ideas like 'community wealth building' and argued for investment in the 'foundational economy' via local 'anchor institutions', overhauls to company governance, and decentralising constitutional reform.[15] The *Covenant* has some limited overlaps with Mandelson's vision, particularly in its attraction to industrial strategy and calls for the reshoring of supply chains, something that businesses are beginning to do already.[16] Overall, though, the *Covenant* points to a more conservative outlook, warier of 'innovation' and 'technological change'.

The full Rutherford mix, including a turn to protectionism (or 'national self-sufficiency', as we are supposed to call it), radical decentralisation, and cultural conservatism, is unlikely to become Progressive Britain's mantra any time soon. [17] And Rutherford may well be the man that McGovern and Phillipson have in mind when they criticise 'nostalgia'.[18] Still, parts of the *Covenant* echoed Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves's pamphlet on the 'everyday economy'. This painted a policy agenda for 'leading edge' industry and innovation as undoubtedly important but radically insufficient, for reasons of quality of life and societal cohesion as much as productivity. It focused instead on the high street, the call centre, the warehouse, the delivery driver, the school, and, yes, the care home. In other words, the places where most British citizens work, play and rest.[19] As we approach tough times, improving their quality, accessibility and affordability will require more than competent governors.

Climate as quicksilver

Nevertheless, the quicksilver required to bind all these base elements together did, at times, emerge during the conference. It came to the fore during one of the best

panels of the day, on the Climate Transition. Chaired by Polly Billington of UK100, it also featured newly elected Westminster councillor Ryan Jude of the Green Finance Institute, the IPPR's Luke Murphy, the environmental lawyer Farhana Yamin, and Darren Jones MP, Chair of the BEIS Select Committee. Why was the Climate Transition panel so effective? It pointed to a synthesis of the three necessary elements: political storytelling, policy detail and electoral strategy.

As everyone from John McDonnell and Boris Johnson to Joe Biden and Annalena Baerbock has realised, advancing programmes on the climate transition (a 'Green New Deal', if you wish) can perform considerable political heavy-lifting. Almost by definition, presenting a programme for the 'just transition' would give Labour an ambitious and forward-looking story to tell. It thus has a proven capacity to invigorate progressive, left-leaning, and young voters. The green transition can be woven into other resonant narratives as well. Pointing out that 'fossil fuels empower the worst dictators', Lammy linked clean energy to foreign policy security; McFadden, meanwhile, tied it to wealth creation. Given the invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis, it could also be productive to link green energy production with stable heating bills over the longer term. Tom Barker has already noted for *Renewal* that the climate transition – and other environmental challenges like greening food production – could be a realistic way of delivering on Labour Together's call for 'national self-sufficiency'.[20]

These visions had greater tangibility than others on the day because they were backed by genuine policy heft. Mandelson may or may not be right to warn in his talk about policy pouring 'from every orifice' of Labour; it is true that the 2019 manifesto was at fault in this aspect.[21] Nonetheless, the climate transition panel were helped enormously by the existence of a meaty headline commitment from the leadership: £28 billion a year for a whole Parliament.[22] Billington could thus ask the panellists how they would spend the money. Transport, energy production, battery storage and R&D featured prominently, inevitably, and Jude also stressed that working with and putting pressure on business and finance will be crucial, given that the sums required to affect a real climate transition will be enormous. But there was a particular focus on the scandal of home insulation: as Labour's Darren Jones argued, it is inexcusable that homes with inadequate insulation are still being built. Although somewhat forgotten now, it is perhaps important that, in September, Starmer pledged £60 billion over a decade specifically to retrofit homes.[23] The case of home insulation points to ways in which Labour could, if they so chose, relate big-picture politics to the realities of people's daily lives – to their 'everyday'. Many of the panel were directly involved in local government and third sector campaigning too, showing the potentially symbiotic relationship between national government spending pledges and community wealth building.

Electioneering was the most contested issue. An audience member rightly brought up a tension between pitching for British voters and campaigning on global climate justice (decolonisation, loss and damage, unequal suffering), a cause that Yamin particularly emphasised. It is worth flagging another problem too: following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, governments in the global north may soon face an unenviable choice between begging dictatorships for gas and introducing energy rationing, both of which are toxic for different constituencies at home and abroad, and risk driving wedges between coalitions of support for green policies.[24] But there was a collective recognition on the panel that a Labour government would need to lobby internationally, not only to secure, but also to move beyond the now hopelessly inadequate COP promise of $100 billion climate finance for developing countries. At the same time, the panel thought concretely about their pitch to British voters. They were clear-eyed about the threat of Steve Baker and the so-called 'Net Zero Scrutiny Group', but pointed out that public opinion was still in a broadly favourable position. Murphy, echoing Fabian research, emphasised the need to talk not about 'green jobs' (which in any case, at a time of record low unemployment, might not be as powerful as some might imagine), but specifically about *local jobs* – and retraining – in everything from infrastructure to insulation.[25]

The recipe?

The green transition is very far from the answer to all our problems. Turning back to alchemy, it is not the panacea. But a 'modest revival of green-tinged left-liberalism', as James Stafford recently put it, could serve as an exemplar recipe for the alchemical transfiguration that Labour needs to achieve.[26]

Start with a clear challenge in which the electorate is genuinely engaged (the climate emergency). Then agree a credible but ambitious policy pledge (£28 billion a year), and give some practical, concrete examples of how it could be spent (infrastructure, insulation, jobs, community revitalisation). Next, connect Westminster politicians with effective actors elsewhere (MSPs and MSs, councils, community groups, think tanks, businesses, trade unions, NGOs) to develop tangible policies rooted in local conditions and lived realities. Finally, use these to sketch out various political narratives and appeals targeted at different voters and constituencies: securing our children's future, protecting the environment, renewing towns and communities across the land, ensuring energy security in our dangerous world, providing good jobs and wealth for all.

I don't want to end a piece on the Labour Party with an unduly positive note: that has rarely proven wise. I admit to leaving the conference with ongoing questions about Labour's political health; and – with his 'beergate' gamble still fresh in minds

– the post-conference pub impressions of Starmer's leadership were mixed. The unnecessary fight that his office later picked over picket lines, straining the trade union link at a time of financial pressure for both workers and the party, shows that the centre left's most self-defeating instincts are alive and well. Still, Labour does now hold many of the required ingredients in its grasp. If it can have a stab at the above recipe and produce similar formulas for other key challenges, like the ageing society and the housing crisis, then perhaps the constant mercury poisoning since 2010 will have been worth it after all.

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Notes

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