

FOREWORD

Equal to the scale of the challenge

Ed Miliband

The cliché about *Renewal* has always been that if the editorial advisory board ever met it would have been quite the gathering. The first edition's board included Tony Blair, Robin Cook, Bryan Gould, Clare Short, Professor Ernesto Laclau and a number of other Labour luminaries and academics. People never seemed to resign so it continued to have the biggest names in Labour politics, on occasion people who would not dream of being in the same room together – and from my experience, the Board has never met.

It is an honour to write the foreword to this thirtieth anniversary issue and I want to thank all the people who have edited and worked on the journal over the years. Truly it has been a labour of love – and probably large frustration with the authors, particularly politicians. Even though Oscar Wilde never did say 'The problem with socialism is that it takes too many evenings', I suspect the editors would gladly adopt it and substitute *Renewal* for socialism.

The combined efforts of everyone that has worked on *Renewal* have produced a valuable contribution to the British left and progressive politics in general. It is all too often remarked upon that British politics is far too much about the hurly burly, day-to-day, and not enough about deep thinking. For thirty years, *Renewal* has provided a powerful antidote to these trends, with a clear-eyed ability not only to interrogate the mechanics of our economy and society, but also to use the insights this generates to chart a course for progressive politics that is both honest and hopeful at the same time.

As I have seen at first hand throughout my career – from taking issues in my suitcase on summer holidays with Labour colleagues in the 1990s, to reading the latest editions as party leader – *Renewal* has provided a vital space for people at all levels of the labour movement to debate, discuss and take ideas seriously. Sally Davison sums up the spirit of *Renewal* when, in a roundtable printed in this edition,

she says ‘to me, the purpose of *Renewal* is clear. It’s a place where you can talk seriously about Labour Party politics’.

It makes me feel old to realise *Renewal* is now thirty. But re-reading the first editorial written by Paul Thompson, what is striking is in some respects how surprisingly undated it feels: the central concerns of the journal have endured. So it calls for ‘a revitalised industrial strategy’ as ‘the centrepiece of economic policy’; ‘... a politics of production ... wealth creation’; and ‘constitutional change [as] inseparable from economic and social policy’.¹

That said, if you had talked to the 23-year-old me at the time of the launch of the journal, it would have been a source of shock how intractable certain issues are. In particular, income and wealth inequality and the centralised and fossilised nature of our politics. Geoff Mulgan used to wisely say that governments overestimate what they can achieve in the short run but underestimate what they can achieve in the long run. But the truth is that shifting our economic and political institutions has, I think, been harder than the founders of the journal anticipated.

Today, the stakes and the extremity of the issues we face seem even bigger than they did at the time of the journal’s inception. Most obviously, the climate crisis, the scale and persistence of deep-rooted inequality and poverty, the crisis in public services, and the historic squeeze on living standards. The scale of change required is even greater, yet the obstacles seem greater too. Robin Cook might have bemoaned the pressures of ‘current affairs around the clock’ in a piece in 1997 due to the plethora of media outlets, but today’s world of social media has multiplied those pressures exponentially.² And the levels of cynicism and scepticism about the ability of politics to deliver seems much greater.

What lessons should we learn from *Renewal*’s history and content, for the practice of politics?

First, if I were to sum up the defining contribution of *Renewal*, I would say it has been to champion the simple notion that ideas do in fact matter in politics. Not ideas in the abstraction of the ivory tower – but ideas as powerful forces that shape, and are shaped by, the political and economic world around us.

This was clear from the beginning. As Florence, George and Emily write in their brilliant history of *Renewal* in this edition, the journal emerged from the *Marxism Today*-influenced debates about capitalist modernity in the late 1980s. *Renewal* at its inception was vital in helping people to make sense of new realities, and in doing so mapping out strategies to rebuild.

Ideas are the most under-estimated commodity of British politics. As my brother David wrote in *Renewal* in 2002:

Notwithstanding the difficulties of modern politics, the simplistic nature of the modern media, the sound bites and the fragmented national conversation, ideas matter, because without them the campaigns get pulled apart. There is no promise of success, because events can conspire against ideas, but without ideas there is no hope.³

Renewal at its best has linked the ideas of think tanks and academia to practical politics. For example, it has been in the pages of *Renewal* that in the years since the Global Financial Crisis the ideas of the ‘new economy’ movement have found a powerful new home. Look today at the dynamic array of organisations working on building the foundations of a new political economy – from IPPR to Commonwealth to NEF to NEON – and *Renewal* has been a nurturing space for this thinking and a transmission belt to and from politics.

Secondly, it is not just the championing of ideas in general that has made *Renewal* special, but the scope and scale of the ideas it has put forward. While there have been hundreds of different policies championed on these pages, what has always stood out about *Renewal* is its insistence that we need to look at the injustices we face and answer them systematically.

Joe Guinan and Martin O’Neill identified in their 2018 essay on the ‘institutional turn’ that in recent years there has been a revival in the pursuit of an ‘egalitarian rebalancing of power through the reordering of the basic institutions of the economy’.⁴ *Renewal* has helped embed the need to think fundamentally about the institutions of British capitalism as an essential part of what it means to be a progressive in politics.

In my work on climate and energy on the Labour frontbench, I am influenced by this approach. We are seeking to build an agenda that links the urgent climate imperative with the need for wider economic reform. GB Energy, the new publicly-owned energy company announced by Keir Starmer in 2022, is being proposed in response to lessons learned from the long-standing failure within the UK to reap the jobs and wealth that the green economy can bring. And the project has also learned from the work of scholars who have argued for a state-led, mission-driven industrial policy which refuses to let Britain be a prisoner of the past. It also speaks to the popular view, seen in the Brexit referendum, that Britain wrongly gave up on issues of ownership and control while other countries did not.

Similarly, our National Wealth Fund to invest – including through strategic equity stakes – in the green industries of the future is part of an entrepreneurial industrial policy. In both GB Energy and the Wealth Fund, we are aiming to deliver not just policy goals for a Labour government, but new institutions that will stand as a legacy that demonstrates that a Labour government can transform

our energy system and our economy through permanent reform of the institutions of the state.

The third lesson of *Renewal* is its consistency as a voice for pluralism and against sectarianism within the Labour Party and the wider left. The joke about the Board has a deeper truth. The old saying in life is 'let's bury our differences', but in the Labour Party it can sometimes feel like the modus operandi is 'let's bury our similarities'.

Renewal has consistently sought to build coalitions within Labour rather than drive people apart. By focusing on ideas rather than personalities, it is able to bring to the surface agreement rather than division. Not agreement based on the lowest common denominator but agreement equal to the challenges we face.

Fourth, *Renewal* was a journal founded with a seriousness about the importance of Labour being in office to change things. And in that sense, at this 30-year mark, we can feel a sense of optimism that we stand at a moment of hope as we did in the mid-1990s. In the first editorial Paul Thompson wrote 'No-one knows if Labour and its fortunes can be transformed'.⁵ Just like after 1993, in 2019, Labour was being written off.

Indeed, Keir Starmer often says that, when he took over, people would say behind his back that there was no hope of Labour winning within one term – or maybe ever. It is an immense credit to him – to his resilience and his determination – that Labour is in a position to win again. It is also to Keir's credit that he is methodically building an agenda that can deliver on the many of the causes that *Renewal* has championed.

From the largest expansion of the rights of working people in a generation, to a world-leading agenda on climate and industrial policy, to an unprecedented shift of power away from Westminster, Labour enters 2023 with a clear sense of our goal: to decisively reform our economy and society so it once again works for working people and communities.

And that takes me to my final point. *Renewal* will be even more important if Labour gets into government. In particular, because *Renewal* doesn't shirk from the scale of the issues the country and the world faces. It takes them head on and demands solutions equal to them. It is, in the best traditions of Labour, ambitious about building the world anew. This is an approach to politics which says we should start with what needs to be done and then work out how we make it happen – not shrink our ambitions.

The fundamental truth is that Labour can only transform the country if it is fuelled by a vibrant ecology of debate, ideas and discussion. Labour will be more likely to

change the country with the ideas, discourse and orientation of *Renewal*. Long may it continue to criticise, cajole and constructively engage with the politics of Labour and Britain. And maybe in the next thirty years we can have a Board meeting.

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Notes

- 1 Paul Thompson, 'Labour – the natural party of opposition?', *Renewal*, Vol 1 No 1, 1993.
- 2 Robin Cook, 'A radical agenda for a new millennium', *Renewal*, Vol 5 No 1, 1997.
- 3 David Miliband, 'Maintaining our radicalism in a second term', *Renewal*, Vol 10 No 2, 2002.
- 4 Joe Guinan and Martin O'Neill, 'The institutional turn: Labour's new political economy', *Renewal*, Vol 26 No 2, 2018.
- 5 Thompson, 'Labour – the natural party of opposition?'