

Where do we go from here?

Martin O'Neill, Alex Runswick, Cathy Elliott

Three reflections on contemporary Labour politics – looking at some of the challenges the party faces and opportunities it needs to seize

The Starmer era shows why we need to reset our political system

Martin O'Neill

Keir Starmer stood for the Labour leadership in Spring 2020 on 'ten pledges' which appeared to commit him to continuing the kind of radical programme that had been outlined in the 2017 and 2019 Labour manifestos. Under headings that signalled a commitment to such announced values as 'Social Justice' and 'Economic Justice', Starmer pledged a number of specific policies, including an increase in income tax for the top five per cent of earners (i.e. those earning above around £80,000); the abolition of university tuition fees; the extension of voting rights to resident EU citizens; and common ownership of 'rail, mail, energy, and water'. During the campaign he also stressed his support for freedom of movement within the EU.

Starmer's platform of what was *de facto* 'Corbynism without Corbyn' was understandably popular with Labour members, many of whom saw it as a way of keeping the radical energy of the Corbyn era while avoiding its shortcomings, and it helped him gain 56.2 per cent of the vote in the 2020 leadership election, securing the support of members from all parts of the Labour Party, including its left. Starmer was especially popular among Remainers, given both the substance of his campaign promises and the way in which he had positioned himself as a flagbearer for a second referendum position while serving as Shadow Brexit Secretary under Corbyn. Indeed, Starmer's Brexit positioning during this period, while popular with large parts of the party membership, can be seen as an important contributory factor to Labour's poor

performance in Brexit-supporting ‘Red Wall’ seats in 2019, where it was up against the simple appeal of Boris Johnson’s commitment to ‘Get Brexit Done’.

As is now well known, Starmer as leader has been a very different creature to the Starmer who had been looking for the votes of Labour Party members. The specific pledges on taxation, tuition fees, common ownership and EU voting rights have all been jettisoned, with Starmer insisting that his overriding commitment is to win the next general election, rather than sticking to earlier commitments or preserving party unity. As for free movement in the EU, by November 2022 Starmer had executed a complete *volte-face*: it was now a ‘red line’ for Labour that free movement ‘won’t come back’.

Consistency and party unity have been sidelined in favour of what Starmer takes to be necessary for the achievement of electoral victory, and a particularly high level of ruthlessness has been deployed in his treatment of the party’s left. Jeremy Corbyn has been suspended from the party whip since October 2020, and made to sit as an independent MP. (Starmer even mocked his predecessor in parliament during PMQs in June 2022, when he called Boris Johnson ‘a Conservative Corbyn’ in regard to his personal unpopularity.) Despite Starmer’s previously avowed support for trade union rights, Sam Tarry was sacked from his shadow ministerial post in July 2022 for appearing on a RMT picket line, and was subsequently deselected as Labour’s parliamentary candidate for Ilford South. Meanwhile, parliamentary selections have been carefully controlled to limit the power of local constituency parties, and to exclude more radical candidates (often on the flimsiest of pretexts), all so as to try to engineer an ideologically narrower, more compliant and less radical future Parliamentary Labour Party. Unsurprisingly, this has caused widespread disillusion among activists, and an exodus of members. Electoral Commission data shows a loss of around 130,000 members between the membership peak under Corbyn (around 564,000 in 2017) to 432,000 by the end of 2021 (the most recent data), and a loss of over 90,000 within 2021 alone. While there is no readily available analysis of the profile of those who have left, one would imagine that it would include many thousands of younger activists whose sense of hope and political possibility will be at risk of turning into disillusion and disengagement.

These are some bare facts, but what should we make of them? There are, one could say, two broad kinds of explanation, which I’ll present in their starkest versions. The first account is that Starmer’s leadership pitch to members was a kind of confidence trick, and that he revealed his true political position as soon as he was able to get past the barrier constituted by the party’s zealous but gullible membership. Indeed, on one version of this view, popular among centrist journalists, Starmer is to be congratulated for managing to hoodwink the left, given the importance (on both electoral and ethical grounds) of marginalising those whose political outlook

is seen as being too far outside the mainstream. On this view, the dupes are the party members, who could only have expected anything better if they had failed to grasp the most basic tenets of political realism.

A different view has recently found expression among some of Starmer's Conservative opponents, and has even had some support from a number of more optimistic voices on the left. (Tory peer Danny Finkelstein wrote a piece in *The Times* in December 2022 arguing that 'Starmer may be more left-wing than he lets on', while on the left Michael Jacobs has argued in *The Guardian* in January 2023 that 'A Starmer government may be more radical than you think'.) On this view, Starmer retains a real radical ambition for the next Labour government, and we should read his attacks on the party's left (and especially on his predecessor) – together with other tactics such as the constant deployment of patriotic imagery (Starmer is forever speaking in front of Union flags) and the performative deference to the Royal Family – simply as a clear-eyed response to the demands of an electoral system which requires Labour to win the support of older and more socially conservative voters in marginal constituencies. On this second view, the dupes are the socially conservative voters, who will be misled by the symbolism, and find themselves supporting a government more radical than they had expected.

My aim here is not to adjudicate this dispute, although I would argue that the second view rests on a misapprehension. For even if the need for electoral victory at all costs is the main driver of policy, it is still the case that a more skilful or ambitious Labour leader could make a success of a position that was clear and direct about the need for radical change on public spending (not least on social housing), renationalisation and the tax system – and which did not go out of its way to traduce the Corbyn-McDonnell era. The constructive synthesis of different elements within the Labour Party's recent history that Starmer presented to members in 2020, taking valuable elements from the leaderships of Blair, Brown, Miliband *and* Corbyn – in combination with a clear ambition to address the structural problems the country faces – could have provided the basis for a coherent and winning political position if it had been pursued resolutely. The fact that this is not what happened seems to call for an explanation that runs beyond mere strategic calculation. Moreover, it seems hard to credit that a party that was truly serious about dispersing political and economic power when it reached office would shut down its Community Organising Unit – as happened in 2021 – or mothball its Community Wealth Building Unit. (The CWBU had been working to provide support for Labour local councils in creating more democratic local economies; it still has a website, but has not met since Starmer became leader.) Moreover, not only could a strategy that remained closer to the 'ten pledges' have been made to succeed: it is also striking that, as the next election approaches, Starmer is increasingly being pulled up on his unreliability both by the Conservatives and by the media, suggesting that this kind of tactical inconsistency may yet carry its own electoral price.

But whatever one's view of Starmer and of his political strategy, the story of the Labour Party under his leadership is a vivid demonstration of the depressing limitations of our archaic political system. Under the First-Past-the-Post system, the spectre of the swing voter in the marginal constituency hangs over everything. This spectral figure is often used as the excuse for a reductive and impoverished political realism, justifying politicians in a hard-headed contempt both for their fellow party members and for any idea of intellectual coherence in their own positioning (as on the first interpretation of Starmer above). Alternatively, this spectral figure is seen as needing to be tricked or placated with symbolic offerings (the flags, the deference to the royal family, the mistreatment of Corbyn and his allies) if even mildly radical political change is to become a possibility. On either construal, our political system puts a structural pressure on its participants that they should eschew intellectual or political consistency. We don't need to spend time apportioning individual blame – the very rules of the system force politicians into these positions. The game of chasing the median voter in marginals biases our politics towards the interests of older voters, and towards *status quo* positions; it robs political parties of their problem-solving capacity; and it denudes parties of their ability to innovate in creating policy solutions to the deep-seated problems faced by so many.

In short, our electoral system makes our politics stupid and dishonest. We face huge structural problems – posed by climate change, economic injustice, flatlining productivity and regional and generational inequality. But we hobble ourselves by trying to face those challenges while shackled to a system that militates against clear and coherent approaches to their solution. You don't have to be unduly optimistic about the prospects for a changed electoral system to be able to realise that a politics that decentres the place of the marginal-swing voter, and allows for the representation of a wider range of perspectives and interests, has a better chance of being less vapid, less dishonest, and more effective.

Martin O'Neill is Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of York and a contributing editor for *Renewal*.

Labour's New Britain report on democratic reform is welcome, but the party needs to learn from New Labour's failings

Alex Runswick

With a divided Conservative government, a failing economy and international conflict, *Renewal's* thirtieth anniversary falls at a time when politics seems all too reminiscent of the 1990s. For those of us who have been working to change the way

we do politics, the Labour Party's serious engagement with the democratic reform agenda only adds to this sense of déjà vu. The report of the Commission on the UK's Future, chaired by Gordon Brown, offers a thoughtful, serious and considered plan on how to fix our politics.¹

It includes some well-established ideas – such as House of Lords reforms, further devolution to the nations and regions and better mechanisms for them to meaningfully work together – as well as some exciting new approaches, including recognising the need for constitutional protections for these reforms. All this is to be welcomed, but if the New Britain envisioned by the Commission is to become a reality, it is essential that today's Labour Party learns from where New Labour went wrong in seeking to fix our broken democracy.

The modern Labour Party has a mixed record on constitutional change. There have been undoubted successes such as devolution to Scotland and Wales. There have been more mixed results in Northern Ireland and in England, where the attempts at regional devolution outside of London were, sadly, never powerful enough to inspire people with a sense that moving the seat of decision making would change their lives. Then there are the abandoned or orphaned reforms. Whilst the New Labour government ensured that the new parliaments had more proportional electoral systems, it never made changing the electoral system at Westminster a priority. The Freedom of Information Act and Human Rights Act have been disowned by those who were instrumental in them becoming law. They were not celebrated by the Labour Party and used to create cultural change, and this has made it all too easy for Conservative governments to undermine them, and even to repeal key reforms. The Human Rights Act in particular makes a real difference to all of our lives, protecting us when we are at our most vulnerable, and yet Labour allowed it to be characterised as a charter for criminals and terrorists.

It is these orphaned reforms that point to the problem at the heart of the New Labour government's democratic reform agenda. They were never Tony Blair's interest or priority. It was an agenda he inherited from the late John Smith and other Labour intellectuals. He knew the reforms had to be made, but he never bought into the thinking about why they were – and are – core Labour Party issues.

The lack of changes to the way Westminster works leaves us with what Keir Starmer described as 'sticking plaster politics' in his New Year speech.² A Labour government can always make worthwhile policy changes while it is in power, but New Labour's experience shows us that they are very easy to unpick. If the Labour Party is serious about challenging inequality in the long term – whether based on race, gender, class or a combination of these and other sources of inequality – then it has to tackle the power structures of the British state.

The most frequent criticism of the democratic reform agenda that I heard within the Labour Party in the early 2000s was that it's not a bread and butter issue, that people don't raise it on the doorsteps. On the surface this is a self-evident, argument-winning claim. But it fails to hear what is behind the issues people raise, their sense of powerlessness and frustration. Most people feel they have no say in how the country is run. There is a reason that 'take back control' captured so many people's imaginations.

One of the exciting things about the Commission's recommendations is that it tackles this issue head on, by explicitly linking economic prosperity with changing the way we do politics. How decisions are taken, where they are taken, and who makes them, matters. The life experiences of the people taking the decisions are critical to getting good policy outcomes that reflect the lives of the communities they represent. It is a question of understanding the challenges that different communities face and making sure that people see themselves reflected in the institutions that make decisions about their lives. The Commission's recommendations – if implemented in full – go a long way to addressing this issue. The risk, as always, is that the relatively easy changes are implemented quickly and the agenda is then quietly dropped. Successful devolution is not solely about changing the location of government departments. That can help, but only if it is reinforced by more fundamental change that gives real power and funding to devolved bodies.

Another element of these proposals that puts reforming our democracy at the heart of a Labour Party policy agenda is the prioritising of social and economic rights. The Commission argues that the United Kingdom has to be a social union where we are all guaranteed the same rights; that access to pensions, state benefits and health and education services is part of what it means to be a citizen. Many other countries have taken this approach to their constitution, and it is exciting to see Labour's thinking develop in this area.

The Commission deliberately decided to focus on reforms it believes can be implemented in one term of a Labour government. There is a strong rationale for this approach – no party seeking to govern should take public support for granted. Changing the structure of the state also requires significant amounts of political capital and time, as previous attempts at House of Lords reform have demonstrated. Starting this work early on will be critical to its success. However, this does mean that there are some big gaps in the Commission's recommendations. Reform of the electoral system is one of the most obvious and concerning. If the way we take decisions matters, then surely the way we as voters choose who we want to govern us is the most fundamental decision of all.

One thing that an incoming Labour government could do in its first term would be to set up a Citizens' Assembly on how we elect members of Parliament. This is a

decision that we the people should take, and the methodology has been well proven for this task. Labour could pass the legislation to create the process – how the assembly would be selected, how it would be funded, and, critically, what would happen to the decisions it makes. This could be through a defined parliamentary process or a referendum, but it would ensure that even if the outcome could not be implemented in the first term the issue would be addressed.

As you would expect from a Commission led by Gordon Brown, there are a lot of well-evidenced, detailed policy proposals in this report. But for it to lead to lasting change, a Labour government needs to take decentralising power every bit as seriously as it does the economy and the NHS. If not, it risks making the problem of our democracy worse rather than solving it.

Alex Runswick was Director of Unlock Democracy from 2013-2019 and is a member of *Renewal's* Editorial Board

Notes

1. Commission on the UK's Future, *A New Britain: Renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy*, Labour Party, London 2022
2. Keir Starmer, New Year speech, 5 January 2023: <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-new-years-speech/>.

Things can only get better (if we do the work): the politics of hope

Cathy Elliott

I have often heard it said in Labour circles that we are, by temperament, optimistic folks who believe that positive change is possible, that things can only get better. Rather than optimism, though, I want to suggest that it is more useful to think about the politics of *hope*. In his darkest days of the 1980s, Václav Havel wrote that hope is not the same thing as optimism. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope entails no such conviction, but rather is the belief that some things are worth doing, regardless of how they turn out. Optimism might entail not doing anything much. Hope is an ongoing *practice*, even when things seem deeply unpromising.¹

Renewal's thirtieth anniversary is an occasion to look forward hopefully to the issues that will be occupying us, on the left, for the next thirty years. Yet, as someone who teaches and researches the politics of nature, I realise that I do not

often hear very hopeful stories about the future. This really came home to me when I read the final chapter of Lee Schofield's brilliant book *Wild Fell*, which is mainly a factual account of his work as a site manager for the RSPB on a Lake District farm, but which ends in a fictional projection of what this work might mean for the future of the landscape.² I found myself in floods of tears, not only because of the beauty of the scene he describes (no further spoilers because I highly recommend that you read it), but also because I realised that I am so constantly beset by thoughts of extinctions and the depletion and destruction of the natural world that thinking about the future often seems impossible to bear. It was the first time I'd read a positive and hopeful story about the future of the non-human world in a long time.

Lee's work for the RSPB on an upland farm is a fine example of the politics of hope. There is no guarantee that things will turn out well. A huge variety of forces are ranged against him: the conservatism of the local farming community; entrenched ideas about what the Lake District 'should' look like (which are deeply embedded in national and romantic imaginaries, as well as bureaucratically enshrined in the Lake District's status as a UNICEF World Heritage Site); the turbulent funding and regulatory regime for farming after Brexit; the sheer physical difficulty of doing the work of rewiggling rivers and planting trees, which can often go wrong; and the deep uncertainties about what the future holds – including the ever-present possibility of the collapse of ecosystems in catastrophic climate change. Nevertheless, Lee keeps going, not only with the demanding everyday tasks of conservation farming – including food production as well as creating the conditions for non-human nature to thrive – but also with the patient political work of building coalitions with others, and, perhaps most importantly of all, telling stories about what he is doing and what it might mean for a flourishing, nature-rich, climate-change-resilient world, buzzing with life.

Luckily, Lee is not the only person getting out of bed each morning and doing the work anyway, even in the face of knowing that it might not turn out well, because it is work that is worth doing. Around the country, we see the examples of farmers like James Rebanks, Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree, Jake Fiennes, and many, many more – farming with and alongside nature and sometimes writing about it or telling their stories, producing a range of books and podcasts that document hopeful stories of how humans can work *with* the non-human world alongside feeding ourselves. Their many readers and listeners include a community of farmers and conservationists who are developing their understanding of the ways in which hope for a thriving natural world might work in practice. And regenerative farms *are* abuzz with life, reporting astonishingly quick recovery of the natural world, and the return and success of rare species in shorter timespans than most of us ever thought possible.

As Alex Darby argued in his review in *Renewal* of James Rebanks's best-selling *English Pastoral*, this kind of work is often a form of 'making-do' and 'making-with' – a complex bricolage of sometimes ad hoc solutions to new and emerging practical problems that require humans and non-humans to work together.³ Just as we can contrast a politics of hope as an ongoing practice to a politics of either optimism or despair (both of which imply static waiting or apathy), so too we can contrast a politics of bricolage and problem-solving with utopian schemes that do not have their hands in the soil of everyday practice. This is not to say that we shouldn't have a vision or a story to tell about a better future. However, there is a striking difference between Lee Schofield's moving vision of what his actually existing daily work might lead to in thirty years' time and the curious visions of a 'rewilded' landscape, devoid of farmers, agriculture and food production, that are imagined by eco-modernist thinkers like George Monbiot. It is hard to know what hopeful practices might lead us to the latter future, or how we would do the hard political work of building the coalition and the consent in rural communities that might enable it.

For the purposes of the *Renewal* readership, then, there are both policy and political implications to a politics of hope as it relates to nature and agriculture. In the next election, whenever it comes, there is everything for Labour to hope and play for in rural and farming constituencies. *Farmers' Weekly* recently reported that support for the Conservatives among farming communities has fallen below 50 per cent for the first time in living memory;⁴ whilst Fabian Society research shows that rural voters are currently as likely to vote Labour as Tory.⁵ This is a rare opportunity to redraw the political map in ways just as radical as we saw in the ill-fated 2019 election. To do so, whilst also supporting the non-human world, it would be wise to draw and build on the stories of hope coming out of regenerative agriculture and its story-tellers. The long-delayed and much-needed Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) enables support for farmers through paying them for providing social and environmental value alongside food production. The scheme could be structured in a way that would support experimentation and bricolage if – instead of micro-managing activities – it focused on supporting farmers to figure out in their own concrete circumstances how to create the conditions for land to buzz with life, and if it then evaluated them on the biodiversity they enable and sustain.

Even more important, though, is that a politics of hope requires story-telling. Hope is that curious balance between the art of the possible and the art of the impossible (to return to a phrase of Havel's⁶) which allows us to re-imagine our world in ways that are daring but also pragmatic, bold but also workable, novel and creative but also rooted in where we are. It is a constant truism of politics on the left that we need a better narrative and yet that we struggle to provide one. Perhaps a good

place to start would be with a patchwork of hopeful stories that projects forward the work already being done by so many farmers, gardeners, conservationists and growers.

Cathy Elliott is an Associate Professor in the Political Science department at UCL and a contributing editor for *Renewal*.

Notes

- 1 Václav Havel and Karel Hvižďal, *Dálkový výslech: (rozhovor s Karlem Hvižďalou)*. Melantrich, Prague 1989. This quotation has been popularised in English by Rebecca Solnit's writing on the distinction between hope and optimism, notably in Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, Canongate Books 2016.
- 2 Lee Schofield, *Wild Fell: Fighting for Nature on a Lake District Hill Farm*, Transworld 2022.
- 3 Alex Darby "'Making do" and "making with": a politics of compassion in the English countryside', *Renewal*, Vol 29 No 3, 2021: <https://renewal.org.uk/making-do-and-making-with-a-politics-of-compassion-in-the-english-countryside/>; James Rebanks, *English Pastoral: An Inheritance*, Penguin 2020.
- 4 Philip Clarke, 'Farmer support for Tories waning as problems mount up', *Farmers Weekly*, 15 December 2022: <https://www.fwi.co.uk/news/farm-policy/farmer-support-for-tories-waning-as-problems-mount-up>.
- 5 Sophie Huskisson, 'Rural voters just as likely to back Labour as Tories no longer "Party of the Countryside"', *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 2022: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/rural-voters-just-likely-back-28803967.amp>.
- 6 Václav Havel, 'New Year's Address to the Nation', 1 January 1990, Prague: http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/1990/0101_uk.html.