

Whither the soft left?

John Denham

Unless Labour's soft left can overcome its aversion to political and intellectual organisation it is likely to remain marginalised in future debates.

'The soft left has no meaningful future in Starmer's Labour Party', declared Owen Jones after Keir Starmer's reshuffle in September 2023.¹ But what, beyond the fate of a few individual shadow minister, is the soft left?

Perhaps, as Jeremy Gilbert told Alan Finlayson in a reshuffle related podcast the soft left 'is the common sense of Labour members to genuinely shift the balance of wealth and power...but (be)willing to accept modest goals and a pragmatic strategy'.² If so, perhaps the soft left is a matter of sentiment, not politics.

There are difficulties in characterising the soft left. One is its apparent instability. At different times being soft left has been associated with opposition to the Common Market and support for EU membership; by support for unilateralism and acceptance of nuclear-armed membership of NATO. On critical issues like equality, social security, foreign policy, immigration and ideas of nation and patriotism it is hard to discern a distinct soft left contribution and prominent individuals associated with the soft left often took wildly different positions on those issues when Labour was in government. The soft left can appear as a temporary resting place for hard lefties as they shift right. It's probably the case that many more people have spent time on the soft left than engaged with it all their political lives.

This renders any narrative open to 'whataboutery': the possibility of citing individuals or issues that don't fit the story. Insider accounts will always be personal to some degree. I was national organiser for Clause 4 Publications and a chair of the Labour Coordinating Committee in the 1980s. I was PPS to Ed Miliband as Labour leader but also optimistically carried the New Labour banner in the 1990s. One prompt for this article was the realisation that younger generations may invest terms like 'soft left' and 'hard left' with very different meanings. (For historical openness about my political evolution, I've uploaded a handful of my own writing from the 1980s onwards).³

Despite these problems I'd argue that there is a set of concerns that the soft left has consistently pursued at least until recently that, taken together, have given it a distinct politics. They centre on three questions:

- How do we understand the evolution of the capitalist economy nationally and globally and what does this mean for effort to create an economy that works for the common good?
- How do we understand the nature of the state, and what does this mean for the way in which power should be exercised in contemporary society?
- And how do we understand the changing electorate and civil society and what does this mean for politics of power and the possibility of radical economic and social change?

Crucially the soft left has been willing to revisit the same political questions as economic, social, and political circumstances have changed; that is one reason why its policy positions have evolved.

The most important soft-left insight is its identification of the tensions inherent in a capitalist economy; between markets as drivers of innovation and wealth creation, and the inescapable tendency of markets to create inequality, insecurity, and instability. From support for the Alternative Economic Strategy to the Green New Deal, soft left policy has tended to emphasise those tools – including industrial policy, procurement, ownership and regulation, and challenges to rentier capitalism and the abuse of market power – that aim to reshape the economy itself, rather than simply make it more competitive or distribute the proceeds of growth fairly.

Of course, all parts of Labour want the economy to deliver for working people, but placing these tensions centre stage distinguishes the soft left from both a right that primarily sees government as enabling markets to work well so that some wealth can be redistributed, and those parts of the left who would measure progress by the extent to which the scope of markets is minimised.

This desire to reshape the market economy inevitably makes the role of the state central. The soft left's turn from economic nationalism to support for EU membership was a recognition of the limits to national state power in an internationalising capitalist economy.⁴ Discussion of the balance between national and international state power has largely been lost in recent years, even amongst those most keen to re-join the EU.

The soft left's questions about state power have gone well beyond economic policy. It has recognised the importance of the state in public provision, but it has argued that the state can be over-bearing, patronising and dominated by producer interests. Running through its history has been a desire to re-imagine public services

around the interests of users, and to empower people to shape the public provision their communities need.

This combination of a critique of markets and a critique of the state has fostered a politics that has usually been economically and democratically decentralist and pluralist. Frequently drawing on older labour movement traditions of cooperatives, mutuality and self-organisation, soft left support has been offered to the Institute of Workers Control in the 1970s and the community wealth building and English devolution policies of today. Pluralism and decentralisation have been seen as essential to shaping an economy and public realm that ‘works for working people’ and as crucial to the process of political change itself. Often (but not consistently) supporting electoral reform, the soft left’s pluralism sees many legitimate competing world views, values and interests in contemporary society that cannot be corralled into support for a single party holding all power within the Westminster UK state. The soft left’s pluralism has, though, also made its most distinctive divide with Labour’s hard left one of political practice: in particular a rejection of hard factionalism, authoritarianism, and assertion of top-down leadership styles. While the hard left is more commonly associated with a desire to wield state power, policy interchange between these strands of Labour thinking have often informed each other much more richly than is sometimes acknowledged.⁵

The soft left has been centrally concerned with the party’s electability and, in this regard, has generally accepted the limits voters place on the pace of change. At the same time, it has argued that by combining an understanding of the evolving views of voters with good political practice and careful framing, arguments for more radical change can be won. This has given the soft left a distinctive take on Labour’s relationship with the electorate. It rejects both the hard left’s optimism that socialist policies would be popular if only asserted sufficiently clearly and the right-wing minimalism that limits ambitions to what voters tell focus groups they want.⁶ In the 1980s it saw radical potential in the growing rejection of paternalism and deference but also acknowledged the emergent social conservatism evident in support for Thatcherism. (More recently the deep social liberalism of today’s soft left has made it less willing to engage empathetically with similar responses to Eastern European migration and the Brexit vote).

This emphasis on a positive and transformative engagement with voters leant an importance to organising outside formal structures and engaging with new social movements. The Labour Coordinating Committee was an early advocate of ‘extra-parliamentary action’ – by which it meant organising in communities and workplaces, not illegal or insurrectionary activities – and this strand of thinking latterly informed Ed Miliband’s support for community organising.⁷ (The record is admittedly patchy. While the soft left was important in bringing the influence of the

women's movement, environmental politics, and the rise of the aspirational voters to bear on Labour, its engagement with ethnic minorities was much less consistent or assured and relations with the politics of trade unions were often more tactical than strategic.)

Taken together the soft left's insights into modern capitalism, the role of the state and the need for a pluralist, decentralist and engaged politics do form the core of a coherent political philosophy, even if they do not comprise a complete politics. It is distinguished from the rigid ideological positions of the hard left concerning, for example, the nature of capitalism or the politics of class, or a right that sees the economic challenge as solely one of technocratic good management. The soft left does not just ask how we can get people to vote Labour, but how will this enhance the prospects of achieving progressive change. It does not see a binary choice between the state and private sector but asks what forms of state power can be progressive.

However, a second feature of the soft left has been its relationship with the Labour Party; one that has both conditioned and limited its political influence.

The soft left's political project has been concerned with the shaping of Labour. It has always been heavily invested in Labour's electoral success. It is hard to imagine the soft left operating outside the Party and it is arguably the only tendency never to have attempted or even considered forming its own party. (The SDP broke away in the 1980s and Tony Blair has openly discussed forming new centrist parties in recent years. Failed hard left breakaways are too numerous to mention.) The instinct to offer critical support for party leaders has only slipped a couple of times: early hostility to the Callaghan government and some participation in the disastrous 'parliamentary coup' against Corbyn. It can fairly claim to have moderated Labour's more schismatic tendencies, notwithstanding its support for the exclusion of anti-democratic Leninist groups.

But the soft left itself has never really attempted serious ideological or factional organisation. Even in the early 1980s the role of the Labour Coordinating Committee was more to shape political debate than to organise amongst the grass roots. There's been no soft left equivalent of the ruthless pruning of parliamentary, council, and mayoral candidates of recent years, nor of the factional politics of Corbyn and Momentum. This has made soft left influence somewhat optimistically reliant on individuals reaching positions as MPs, ministers, shadow ministers, and local government leaders.

Both Neil Kinnock's effort to rebuild Labour after 1983 and Tony Blair's leadership of New Labour would have struggled without the support of MPs and activists from the soft left. While it has often been vital to keeping the party together, relation-

ships with leaderships have been chequered. Hoping for influence but disconcerted by the paths taken, the soft left has been midwife to political and policy changes it did not wish to see. In the 1980s, the soft left's insistence on the need to develop Labour politics for a changing world gave support to Neil Kinnock's modernising project.⁸ This demand was reasserted after 1992 but the desire to reflect a changing electorate and critique of the state made it an uncomfortable ally of other modernisers seeking more competitive and contested approaches to public service reform. As a founder editor of *Renewal* has written, '[l]eaders of the New Labour project thought that the forces of contemporary British society and British capitalism were already modernising in a way which was favourable to a social democratic project'.⁹ This was not what most on the soft left believed, but lacking a coherent alternative politics, it was ill-prepared to anticipate or understand the actual politics of optimism about globalisation, technological change and the introduction of competitive mechanisms into public services.

In government, the sense of a coherent soft left politics stagnated further. For as long as tax revenues flowed concerns about the future of the economy were set aside, apart from a few voices.¹⁰ There was some disgruntled murmuring as Labour under Blair brought quasi-market choice into health and schools, but there was little serious thought about what a different government programme would look like. The cost of this complacency soon became clear. In 2008 Gordon Brown's government played a crucial role in stabilising the UK and the global economy but the banking crisis revealed how little the soft left had to say about national or global economic management. Hopes that the left would be natural beneficiaries of the fall-out soon proved short-lived right across Europe.

Those were the unpropitious circumstances in which Ed Miliband became the first 'soft left' leader since Neil Kinnock. His aspiration to be a 'reformer of markets and reformer of the state' was a distillation of soft-left politics. The project's failure disappointed those who hoped for a popular radical Labour politics. It is now hard to find much serious discussion of this period,¹¹ as both Labour's right and the Corbynite left have a common interest in discrediting the whole idea of a soft-left politics.¹² It is largely that forgotten that Miliband set the political agenda for two years with attacks on the banking system, calls for responsible capitalism, advocacy of pre-distribution, (better to develop a high wage economy than subsidise low wages through tax credits), a proposed energy price freeze, an early version of the green new deal, and attacks on media phone hacking and collaborators developed a broad range of radical ideas. Miliband was rewarded by significant if not overwhelming poll leads. In 2012, Ernst Stetter of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies could talk of 'a new young leadership that has drawn the attention of an entire continent'.¹³

Ed Miliband's eventual failure (for which supporters like me must share responsibility) revealed the deep weakness of the soft left. There was no organisation of supportive MPs or members. Miliband targeted flaws in the market economy without the deeper analysis required to frame a different type of economy. He felt forced to appoint Ed Balls, a consistent opponent of industrial strategy who had a different take on the nature of the economic crisis, as Shadow Chancellor. When Balls' Keynesian critique of George Osborne failed to convince voters, Labour was forced into the austere and minimalist programme that lost in 2015.

The legacy of that period is a soft left that is intellectually and politically at its weakest for 50 years (if it can be said to exist in any meaningful form at all). There was no clear soft left candidate to replace Miliband as leader and Jeremy Corbyn's victory reflected a membership frustrated both by elements of the New Labour and Labour failure in opposition. A disorientated soft left struggled to find a coherent response. Many MPs supported the coordinated resignation of shadow ministers prompted by Labour's dismal polls and Corbyn's minimal contribution to the Remain campaign, but grassroots activists often engaged with Momentum and Corbyn's anti-austerity politics. Labour's relative recovery in the 2017 general election has largely been ignored as an inconvenient truth but it was also a missed opportunity. A confident and assertive soft left might have enabled Labour to understand both the radical potential of the moment – based on a manifesto broadly in line with mainstream European social democracy – and its limitations. It might have diverted Corbyn's leadership from the hubristic and arrogant misinterpretation of the 2017 result that led to catastrophe in 2019.

In the past two decades the two organisations most associated with the soft left have been Compass and Open Labour. Compass has focussed on the soft left's interest in decentralist, democratic and pluralist politics and, by opening its membership beyond Labour, has necessarily had less focus on Labour as a party. Open Labour has run slates for NEC elections but, being grassroots based and lacking obvious public engagement from MPs and Shadow Ministers, failed to make much impression. Neither organisation has engaged to any great extent with the changing nature of the economy, once one of the soft left's defining issues, nor of the politics of a changing electorate.

Labour's soft left is now more obvious in its absence than its presence. We would struggle to identify a group of prominent individual advocates, any form of coherent organisation, a body of intellectual work, or even a recognisable process of engagement between politicians, activists, think tanks, and intellectuals that could claim the title. The vitality of the soft left has also always depended on the health of a wider eco-system of think-tanks, academics and other strands of political thinking, much of which has an only arms-length relationship with Labour politics. Hence the

influence of *Marxism Today* in the 1980s or some of the new economic thinking under John McDonnell. Despite the efforts of journals like *Renewal* and *Chartist*, there is no organised focal point for synthesising the analysis and political strategy that is needed. In the present time, when much of the left lacks intellectual vibrancy, think tanks are often pursuing well-trodden paths and Labour's own leadership does not encourage any wider political debate; as a result the paths to soft left influence are weak. There are individuals working in a recognisably soft-left tradition, including some of Labour's local authority leaders and mayors, and elements of the community are engaged with some of the soft left's long-standing concerns, but the whole lacks coherence.

This gives the soft left a bit of a problem as we contemplate a new government. Rachel Reeves' stress on the importance of the state in delivering 'securonomics' has strong echoes of the soft left's desire to reshape rather than just manage the economy. But does her and Starmer's fiscally cautious minimalist policy approach reflect focus group concerns about radical policies or a deeper conservatism? Former Downing Street advisor Mike Jacobs argues that 'Keir Starmer might be more radical than you think',¹⁴ and Andrew Rawnsley quotes a 'labour veteran' as saying 'of all the people in his office, he's the most left wing. Not madly left, sensible left. He's essentially soft left.'¹⁵ But does the soft left have a coherent view of what might be possible? To use old Labour language: how can we know if the bastards are selling us out if we don't know what *not* selling us out would look like?

Making predictions at this stage is a fool's game – hopefully we will find out soon enough. But the challenges that pre-occupied the soft left from the 1970s will still be central for a new government. The concentration of economic power in tech companies and resource-rich nations and the disproportionate social and political influence of the super-wealthy will clash ever more strongly with the economic and social impact of climate change and the sustainability crisis. Inequality is surging alongside instability and insecurity and conflicts over the distribution of resources will grow. Electorates are continually reshaped by these economic forces, as well as by migration, diversity and cultural politics. Voters' relationships with the political process are weakened by the hollowing out of democratic institutions, the limited reach of nation states and the pernicious divisiveness of social media. More than at any time in the past 70 years we are a nation splintered by different life experiences, material circumstances, and values.

A soft left critique might ask serious questions about the limits of nation state action (as it did in the 1980s). It would demand a far sharper analysis of the supra-national institutions than we hear today when the argument for EU membership is more likely to stress larger markets or liberal migration policies than the reshaping of Europe's capitalist economy. As Labour places a new emphasis on national

economic resilience, the soft left should foreground the constraints imposed by the sustainability crisis and a fragmenting global economy. These create new tensions between growth strategies and a focus on the everyday economy. The likelihood of increasing external shocks must also question our assumptions about the long-term viability of welfare capitalism.

The most pressing global challenges require an urgency of international action that is self-evidently missing today. In practice it means finding the ways of forging international cooperation between the actually existing governments of other powerful states whether progressive and democratic or not, raising questions about the assumption that Labour can easily strike the balance between self-interest and the promotion of progressive principles.

There is a global turn to the state, but for every left-of-centre regime there is another using the power of the state to protect power and privilege and to suppress popular discontent. State action of itself does not make a government progressive, and the soft left's critique of the limits of the state remains important. The importance of decentralising and democratising the state, particularly in England, is now more widely recognised, but support for change is shallow. There is no consensus on how best to do it and little recognition that devolution requires profound reform to the central state. On what should be a defining soft left issue, support for community empowerment beyond the state remains the preserve of a handful of local authorities, think-tanks, and activists.

Labour conference now supports electoral reform (even if the leadership rejects it), but there is remarkably little serious discussion of the politics of an electorally reformed Britain. It would inevitably lead to the fragmentation of the largest parties, a reduction in Labour's electoral weight, the rise of extremist parties, and the necessity of new political alignments. This intersection of political structures and electoral politics would once have been a pre-occupation for the soft left but is absent from political debate today.

A critique of the state today now also needs to explore the shifting boundaries between democratic and legal decision-making evident in the troubled relationships between parliament, the executive and the courts. A radical Labour government may find that the soft left's often unspoken preference for a court adjudicated rule of law over democratic decision-making needs to be re-thought.

Careful attention is needed to the changing electorate. The insecurity and exploitation experienced by generation rent will colour their political outlook as individualism and consumerism shaped their parents'. The growing class of insecure work and high exploitation with little or no collective power or representation (and whose voices are rarely heard in middle class Labour) needs a political

response well beyond improved labour rights. Labour's current poll lead amongst both groups should not be allowed to foster the assumption that both are inherently progressive. The rise of the populist right in western Europe should tell us the opposite. Little thought has been given, either, to the politics of a society that simultaneously comprises those disconcerted by too much diversity and change, those for whom super-diversity is the comfortable norm, a Tory cabinet with many ethnic minority members and the anger of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The defining issues of the capitalist economy, the nature of the state, democracy and decentralisation and the politics of a changing electorate will confront a Keir Starmer government. Whether that government will be 'soft left' as some anticipate or less radical as some fear, its leadership will have had less engagement with a coherent and organised soft-left than any in the past fifty years. It will lack the organised intellectual input the soft left at its best can provide. And it will lack the support of consciously soft-left politicians, activists, and commentators that Labour leaders have enjoyed in the past. Whether Labour's leadership would see it this way I don't know but the current weakness of the soft left is a problem for Labour as a whole. The last thing a Labour government needs is an oppositional left from within its own party membership, yet without an engaged and constructive soft left, able to pose alternative choices in a constructive way, that may be what we get.

The soft left politics outlined here echo a piece written in 2020 by one of *Renewal's* founding editors, Paul Thompson.¹⁶ Is there any mood today to rebuild a soft left as a conscious and organised political project to strengthen the Labour Party? People are exploring the underlying political issues – quite often in the pages of *Renewal* – and there is a wealth of writing about contemporary capitalism and healthy debate about economic and political democracy and a growing literature of good practice. Serious discussion about the politics of a changing electorate beyond the transactional is much harder to find. The left has consistent blind spots that prevent it from understanding the clash between liberalism and more social conservative world views as a political rather than a moral question. Nonetheless there is no shortage of raw intellectual material with which a Labour soft left could engage in order shape party strategy.

But it feels like little effort is being made to draw politicians, social movements, unions, intellectuals, and think-tankers together in a coherent and concerted way, or to draw out the implications of their work for Labour. Unless a soft left can overcome its aversion to political and intellectual organisation it is likely to find itself marginalised in future debates.

John Denham is Professor and Director of the Centre for English Identity and Politics at the University of Southampton. He was MP for Southampton Itchen 1992-2015 and served as Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

Notes

- 1 Owen Jones, 'After the reshuffle, Blairites dominate Starmer's shadow cabinet. That's bad news for the rest of us': <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/04/blairites-keir-starmer-shadow-cabinet-left>, 4 September 2023.
- 2 'Why is the Labour leadership attacking the soft left', Culture, Power, Politics podcast: <https://culturepowerpolitics.org/2023/07/03/why-is-the-labour-leadership-attacking-the-soft-left/>
- 3 See: <https://j-denham.medium.com>
- 4 Colm Murphy, *Futures of Socialism: 'Modernisation', the Labour Party and the British Left 1993-1997*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2023, Ch.1.
- 5 Alfie Steer, 'Overcoming the division between Labour's hard and soft left': <https://labourhub.org.uk/2023/07/17/overcoming-the-divisions-between-labours-hard-and-soft-left/>, 17 July 2023.
- 6 Paul Thompson, Frederick Harry Pitts and Jo Ingold, 'A strategic left?: Starmerism, pluralism and the soft left', *Political Quarterly*, Vol 92 No1, 2021 pp32-39.
- 7 Nigel Stanley, 'After the Landslide The Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) on the 1983 election': <https://medium.com/@nigelstanley/after-the-landslide-the-labour-co-ordinating-committee-lcc-on-the-1983-election-fffo3b2a5018>, 15 December 2019.
- 8 Murphy, *Futures*.
- 9 Sally Davison, Sue Goss, Neal Lawson and Paul Thompson, 'Putting the "critical" into critical friend', *Renewal*, Vol 31 No1, 2023, pp25-34.
- 10 See, for example, *New Labour – Rebuilding the Coalition*, available at: <https://j-denham.medium.com>.
- 11 For an exception, see: Eunice Goes, 'The Labour Party under Ed Miliband: trying but failing to renew social democracy', *Renewal*, Vol 24 No1, 2016, pp29-40.
- 12 See e.g.: Nathan Yeowell (ed.), *Rethinking Labour's Past*, Bloomsbury, London 2022.
- 13 Fabian Society, 'The shape of things to come': <https://fabians.org.uk/the-shape-of-things-to-come/>, 26 June 2012.
- 14 Michael Jacobs, 'Keir Starmer might be more radical than you think', <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/04/keir-starmer-government-labour-leader>, 4 January 2023.
- 15 Andrew Rawnsley, 'Keir Starmer is borrowing from Tony Blair, but that doesn't make him a Blairite': <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/17/keir-starmer-is-borrowing-from-tony-blair-but-that-doesnt-make-him-a-blairite>, 17 September 2023.
- 16 Paul Thompson, 'Hard left, soft left: Corbynism and beyond', *Renewal*, Vol 24 No2, 2016 pp45-50.