

A new politics of class

Interview with Jon Cruddas MP

Jon Cruddas talks to Jonathan Rutherford about socialism, class and the Labour Party.

What brought you into politics?

I was from a very political family, but not in terms of formal party politics. Ours were informed by Catholic social teaching and by liberation theology. We didn't have labour movement heroes as such, it was more the likes of Oscar Romero or John F. Kennedy. My family came from Donegal and my dad was a sailor. I was one of five brothers and sisters, and we were the first generation in our family to go to university. Before I went there, I spent some time in Australia and got involved in trade union politics. After getting involved in the labour movement I gravitated towards the Labour Party.

I couldn't vote in 1979, but I was a product of Margaret Thatcher. Youth unemployment, the bomb, the miners' strike, all were central to my politics. In 1981 I went to Warwick and stayed to do an MA and PhD. I was interested in political economy and the debates around new forms of economic regulation and post-fordism. Robin Murray's work on what constitutes a modern left political economy influenced me. At the time, he was working with Ken Livingstone at the GLC. I was interested in analyses of the world that were less prescriptive and dogmatic than some of the old left traditions.

Did you keep hold of the liberation theology?

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Not really, though scratch beneath the surface and it's there. My middle brother became a Carmelite.

Were you drawn to the issue of migration through it?

Absolutely. I'm really interested in the issue of migration and demography. It is like going round in a personal full circle. It's the Irishness of it, the nature of diaspora politics. But when I was younger it was never codified in the Labour Party, despite support for the Labour Party in the family. It was much more fluid and diverse than that. Much more ideas driven. I was interested in traditions of thought. And now I think we're faced with a need to just keep traditions of thought alive, despite their unfashionable nature.

After Warwick you started working for the Labour Party. You were quite into the New Labour establishment weren't you?

Yes. I was drawn to it. I started working for the Labour Party on labour market issues and did a lot of work with the trade union movement. I could see a lot of strengths in what Blair was doing. At his best he was an interesting and seductive political figure. He challenged old assumptions. I saw him at close quarters from the early 1990s when he became Shadow Employment Minister. In 1997 I was in Downing Street for two years and we had some space to deal with issues around individual and collective rights at work, some of which will be enduring. But that is a long way away now.

At the time I thought the important thing was to gain power and then it was 'game on' in trying to change things. It wasn't about seeing power as an end in itself. But I began to think that the New Labour project was simply morphing into an exercise in power retention - seen as an end in itself. I really began to fall out with the New Labour project after I became MP for Dagenham. There was a contradiction between the language used by the government and the empirical reality on the ground.

You must have confronted something there that didn't fit easily with the New Labour rhetoric.

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To me Dagenham is the prism through which I see it all. It is the traditional cornerstone of manufacturing industry in London. It is the lowest cost housing market in Greater London and the site for extraordinary demographic change. You see global forces ripping through it at the micro-level, and the wreckage being created. The government cannot offer anything other than a benign take on these forces. What's worse is that politically it is actually ratcheting up the tensions rather than working out how we can help communities navigate through this dramatic period of change - for example through debates around migration and asylum. But it was the debate around Higher Education funding that really broke it for me.

Why was that?

It went to the core of my own family's experience. Both my parents left school at fourteen. We are five kids and between us we have five degrees, four MAs and two PhDs. We were the beneficiaries of comprehensive education and free access to higher education. Higher education provided us with the ability to live in a completely different world. Here was a Labour government coming up with a highly utilitarian approach to knowledge. It reduced education to a rational economic exchange - discount for the future, borrow money to get a qualification which will allow you to enter the labour market at a higher rate of return. Education was simply seen as an issue of economic rationality. Questions about what constitutes knowledge and the liberating potential of education were abandoned in favour of a very right-wing conception of human capital.

Once you became an MP, what was the experience of Dagenham like?

It's the fastest changing community in Britain. The velocity of change is extraordinary. If you see the changes in the school rolls and the patterns of take up of the right to buy, against the legacy of long-term inequalities in access to health and the large percentage of low skilled work amongst the resident population, it throws up issues that have been completely off the radar of government. The population is growing faster than the state is financing public services. These changes occur in a zero sum game, and this allows people, and in particular the far right, to racialise access to scarce resources. I'm not an oppositional MP. My psychology is one of pragmatism and incremental

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attempts to alter the terms of debate. But I couldn't accept the Government's failure to recognise what was going on on the ground - the material forces that lie behind community fracture and racial tension.

What is the solution? Is it to talk about 'British jobs for British workers', trying to dog whistle to people's fear? Or is it to find a different take on the problem? I think that in fully addressing these problems class is the crucial issue. But class has no traction within the Labour Party. The Government, or New Labour, is almost demonising a white working class as violent and degenerate. It's as if it is unable to have a rational debate about patterns of migration, or inequality, or demographic change. Instead there is this populist, dog-whistling rhetoric - that's the kind of game that's going on now in terms of political positioning.

I think we can retrieve this situation if we remake a class politics which recognises the heterogeneity of the working class. Why is the issue of class politics so contaminated now? The answer lies back in the intellectual moves made by Blair - particularly the debates around the knowledge economy - which assumed that the working class was withering away. As Blair transformed Labour into New Labour he legitimised the change by importing an intellectual framework that described old labour as being in empirical decline. The working class was no longer of relevance as a political and economic category.

But you can challenge that view by looking at where jobs are being generated, and what is happening in the real economy, as opposed to the new economy. Look at the interlinked issues of the demand for labour, the patterns of migration, the long-term inequalities in wages and access to public services and housing. These have a resonance today even more than they had when New Labour was elected ten years ago. Focus on these issues and we'll be able to get back into the debates around inequality and social immobility, and so find alternative, social democratic remedies.

Your analysis contradicts a lot of what the more high profile sociologists are saying about individualisation, and the cultural changes in class. Can a singular working class still be appealed to?

I'm arguing that we anchor the experiences of different groups in a materialist politics. That is not necessarily reductive. It allows you to contextualise materially the shared

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experience of different people. The approach we have at the moment is a semiotic game of emphasising difference, be it through symbols of race or of religious difference. It's unable to understand or navigate its way through the politics of migration and demography. For the last ten years New Labour has used patterns of migration as a twenty-first century incomes policy, holding down the wages in semi-skilled and unskilled work. Now the government is reaping the consequences. And they can't deal with it by regulating the labour market because they've set themselves against this approach. Instead they have retreated into an identity politics which includes a simplistic idea of a white working class that is illiberal, intolerant and degenerate. Without a materialist politics one is unable to transcend the things that break people apart - one cannot find the shared experiences that bridge cultural, religious and racial differences.

Is it just about identity politics? The ideology associated with the knowledge economy introduces a method or practice of entrepreneurialism - it sets about constructing supposedly self-reliant individuals out of class subjects.

This human capital approach has all the hallmarks of right-wing liberal economics. The only deficiency that matters is imperfect information and knowledge. The Labour Party has retreated to the foundations of neoclassical political economy. The state is removed as an actor except for providing the means to access human capital. Once this access is perfected inequality is remedied. This is why the HE debate is so critical - it emptied out the politics of class and inequality. What counted was individual rational decision making and discounting for the future rather than materially locating the inability to work or to become socially mobile within a broader pattern of inequalities. This was always the fundamental dividing line between left and right and it has been intellectually collapsed. As education is commodified it becomes a form of capital you can use to consume more commodities. This to me is the intellectual cornerstone of the whole movement that is New Labour. As such Blair was a more profound political figure than people assume.

Does this intellectual project have its source in Peter Mandelson and Charlie Leadbeater at the Department of Trade and Industry in 1997?

That's exactly it. I remember we were having a fight around what eventually

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became the Employment Relations Act - two years debate about the labour market, union recognition, new ideas of solidarity through rights the state intervenes on. At the same time Mandelson and Charlie Leadbeater were writing the 1998 White Paper on the knowledge economy - the definitive neoclassical testimony to the New Labour project. It was followed by a second White Paper in 2001, which addressed the creation of a labour force suited to the knowledge economy. I think these will be seen in the future as key texts that shaped the New Labour project. In terms of the history of economic thought it places New Labour on the right of centre intellectually: a neoclassical Labour. Their neoclassical political economy frames all inequalities in terms of individual economic rationality. Those who fail in education and the knowledge economy do so because of their inability to act on their preferences with reference to knowledge, work and leisure. The White Papers intellectually emptied out the whole of the labour and social democratic traditions.

Was Mandelson the key figure in shaping this New Labour politics?

What he was doing with Leadbeater was profoundly important intellectually. They provided the justification for the lack of desire to intervene over and above simply correcting market imperfections. Margaret Thatcher used to talk about unemployment as if it was a trade off between work and leisure. Now it's the same logic but talked about in terms of economic inactivity. Poverty is viewed as a consequence of an individual choice between work and leisure.

Risk is shifted from the state and business to the individual.

The state has no role other than maintaining infrastructure and facilitating markets. Stuart Hall's analysis of New Labour's 'double-shuffle' is absolutely right. The veneer, the narrative, the language was brilliantly constructed - the semiotic game of political positioning was brilliant - but underneath was the much more important engine which was working off the deep liberal agenda of the commodification of public services, responding to capital's global demands and the like.

You present a very different image to the one many people have of a New Labour

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dominated by a pragmatic 'let's see what works' mentality. There was a deeper intellectual current at work.

I do think there was a deeper philosophical movement in New Labour that was worked through during the long period of opposition. You can trace it through an arc beginning with the 1983 Manifesto, then the defeat in 1987, up to the supply side socialism of 1992, with Brown as the architect. Then there is the radicalism of Blair from 1994 onwards. Throughout this period there is a systematic withdrawal of the state. Post-1983 the negatives are defined as trade unionism, 'tax and spend', and the politics of nationalisation. I think there was a grouping of right-wing Labour figures who saw that, generationally, the only way to gain power was to confront these polling negatives. Initially this was done with reference to a body of ideas that were quite brazenly used as justification for short-term political moves in pursuit of electoral purposes.

The intellectual work of New Labour intensified from 1994 on, when a number of intellectuals, for example Giddens and Leadbeater, rose to the challenge and codified the political retreat. The genius of Blair when he became party leader was his ability to tell a story that legitimised all the political retreats since 1979 - 'there is a rupture occurring in terms of industrial organisation caused by new technology and globalisation. Only I can understand it with reference to the knowledge economy'. The intellectual work helped to mobilise and organise the electoral cohorts that mattered in terms of gaining political power. It also wrote off the working class and other groups who had no political traction. It used a sociology that assumed they had no empirical significance in the future. It was a brilliant political movement to gain and retain political power.

How did it start coming undone?

The world was not like their stylised construction of it. The central contradiction of the knowledge economy thesis and the higher education debate is the belief that there is a massive expansion in the demand for graduates. If there isn't this demand and you're equipping people with this utilitarian way to tap into something that doesn't exist, they end up doing jobs for which they're overqualified. You've got generational immobility in the jobs market and in housing.

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So the higher education system is producing a large number of graduates who have aspirations for a better life which the labour market will deny them? As well they'll have large debts, they'll have to pay for their own pensions, mortgages and deal with the financial burden of the ageing baby boom generation. New Labour's emphasis on the supply side and its liberal economics have created a series of contradictions which are adding up to one big contradiction.

I think New Labour's reforms that were influenced by the knowledge economy thesis are built on sand. The question is how can we create new forms of economic and social solidarity that can deal with the economic problems we face and also address the renewal of democracy and the global issues of environmentalism. The only alternative approach is one grounded in the empirical realities of modern Britain in terms of migration, housing, labour market insecurity. It also demands electoral reform. I always thought electoral reform was a second order issue. Now I think our present electoral system has helped to sustain the neo-liberal project.

Returning to the contradiction. There also exists a large swathe of the population who are totally estranged from the education system.

This is where you get the fear of the far right. The BNP is getting very sophisticated. They're talking about being more labour than New Labour. They are using new technologies to mobilise people. Their message is anti-globalisation, anti-Europe, anti-Muslim, and the scapegoating of forms of cultural and racial difference. It is precision bombed onto those cohorts who were disenfranchised from the New Labour project, people for whom it was previously an article of faith that they'd go nowhere else.

I've spent the last year going round the country and this problem is everywhere. The BNP stood 800 candidates in the local elections in 2006. That's 500 more candidates than they've ever stood before. They averaged 14.8 per cent of the vote. They have their own internal contradictions, like any Trotskyist group, but they're not going away. The seeds are there for extremism and violence. My fear is that if they become more effective, especially in areas where the Labour Party is no longer an organising and mobilising force, they'll be much more significant than the National Front of the late 1970s.

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Compass is attempting to grapple with these issues but in a very cold climate. We've tried to force the government to deal with the issue of agency workers. Migrant workers are being abused by unscrupulous employment agencies. In my constituency there are Lithuanian workers on £15 a day - half the minimum wage - and these stories ricochet through the community. The state should intervene. But this goes against New Labour politics. We're reaping the consequences of the way we've been using migration to enforce our flexible North American labour market. Similarly the education strategy around secondary school academies undermines the capacity to provide solidaristic, comprehensive solutions.

These issues were central to your campaign to be elected Deputy Leader. Did you decide yourself that you wanted to stand?

I was asked to by some colleagues in the union movement and the Party. It wasn't my thing.

But why did they ask you?

I was never interested in the Campaign Group. I'm fairly pragmatic, but I'm increasingly frustrated, so maybe it was that. I've got no idea. It was a punt from the left field that arguably wasn't going to fly.

Well, it did.

It did, despite my anonymity. If we can build some ideas, I now think there is more life left in the Labour Party than I had previously assumed.

There's something about you being both inside and outside that makes you an attractive proposition in terms of how to go beyond New Labour. You have to be outside enough to see the problems, but inside enough to have a hand in it, to have some leverage. Compass has a similar kind of structure.

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I agree. Compass has been effective both inside and outside the party in using this structure. In the Trident debate it was able to quickly create a deep and wide coalition. All sorts of NGOs and groupings joined. We managed to get one hundred votes against the renewing of Trident. Compass also created a coalition of NGOs and groups around the Company Reform Bill and managed to nudge a few changes through the Parliamentary process. It is also doing work around agency employment relations and a positive immigration policy. If we can introduce the basic tenets of social democracy - this is not by any stretch of the imagination a radical agenda - by putting our arguments into the mix it allows for a more lively and pluralist democracy, both in terms of the House of Commons and, more important, the Labour Party. It creates a contested terrain. Contrast this strategy with the government's ever more sophisticated exercise in political cross-dressing and the crafting of the soundbite.

You did incredibly well in the Deputy Leadership contest, you became a public figure and gained quite a lot of political capital - what might you do with it?

I'm not actually that interested in the question. The fundamental issue is what constitutes a non-sectarian, modern, centre-left politics, both inside the Labour Party and outside it. What coalitions do we need to create a durable politics? What is its policy framework? I think a narrative is beginning to take shape out of these questions. Compass is pioneering this process and translating it into political strategies. To be perfectly honest I had wondered whether the Labour Party was retrievable as an organisation. But going round the country during the Deputy Leadership contest allowed me to tap into what people were thinking. There were a lot more people interested in the issues than I thought there'd be. It has got me going and given me enthusiasm.

Parallel to the deputy leadership elections you were also involved in broader anti-fascist campaigns. The Hope not Hate campaign brought in music, made a film, and linked up with the Daily Mirror.

Yes, parallel yet linked campaigns - that is the future. We made use of the internet. We used databases and were able to communicate quickly and widely to large

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numbers of people. We used new forms of interactive engagement and tried to link these ways of organising to a more fluid politics of anti-fascist activity. It worked well. I think you'll see these organising techniques re-surface in Livingstone's campaign for Mayor. We've created a collective memory - or at least the beginning of one - which we can tailor for other types of campaign.

Can the Labour Party develop these forms of cultural politics?

What we were doing was far better than simply discussing whether or not we're in the era of the end of the political party. I think that some of the anti-BNP activity can re-build the Labour Party as a vehicle for local mobilisation. A cabinet minister told me that this argument is nonsense because we're now in the era of the virtual party. The role of the party is to scientifically construct messages for a few thousand voters. I'd contest that idea. The crucial question is what will constitute a modern political party. It has to be much more open and contingent to local circumstances. Whether its development is towards formal membership or some other relationship to people is an open question. Personally I like the federal architecture of the party because of its essential pluralism.

John Harris and I addressed these issues in our Compass pamphlet, *Fit for Purpose*. What would Conference look like? What would be the basic units of party organisation? How should we fund political parties? These questions are up for grabs. My approach is not to rule anything out in terms of organisational reform. I think we have to contest the authoritarian model that we have now. What worries me is that, despite what everyone during the Deputy Leadership contest said about rebuilding the party on the ground, very little has been done.

Do you meet with other Compass MPs?

Well it's more we swarm around different issues. We're not a faction with its own rule book and membership. We're much more open-ended and deliberative, focusing on specific campaigns. The Tribune Group has in effect gone and the Campaign Group is in numerical decline. There are now acres of territory between New Labour and the Campaign Group. The question is how we enter into that

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territory and construct a fairly loose conversation around some of the issues.

But what do you do about power and actually achieving change?

Well you can't just undo the rules of the game. You have to mobilise and organise around specific policies. There is also an issue about whether we should organise across the different decision-making bodies of the party.

Do you feel more at ease in Dagenham or when you're out on tour than you do in Westminster?

Yes. I'm not particularly interested in the House of Commons. Actually I was never interested in being an MP. What interests me are the issues.

The reason I ask is that I detect a reluctance about you becoming a 'personality'. You did incredibly well in the Deputy Leadership contest but you seem to be backing away from the implications. Whatever you think about it, people look to you as someone who might play a central role in reconstituting the left of the Labour Party.

Well that interests me. But it's my general disposition ... I mean I'm uncomfortable being an MP myself. I'm only just getting used to it.

What is it about being an MP that makes you uncomfortable?

I'm not interested in, as a mate described it, getting up there and 'doing the Placido Domingo'. I don't like the showmanship of the game. What grips me, perhaps in a naive way, are ideas and creating a radical programme of social and economic emancipatory change. I didn't find the deputy leadership contest a lot of fun. I did it because it was put to me that one can't be critical and then, when the opportunity arises to do something about it, run away from the responsibility.

We're told time and time again by successive leadership groups that the only game in town is a deeply cynical and pessimistic view about the human condition

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and the country. That the only way a non-conservative government can be in power is through the politics we have now. It's seen as a given and beyond debate. In some ways I once agreed with this, as a strategy for gaining power in 1997. But now this approach is turning in on itself. It has itself become an actor in undermining our capacity for economic and social change, because of its deep conservative and liberal political economy. I'm forced to contest it intellectually, and that means politically as well.

You seem to be at a point now where you have to think about your future role.

I am getting more comfortable with being a politician. The last year has been a steep learning curve. A journalist said to me the other day that someone had told him that he wouldn't be able to talk to me unless he understood my basic catholicity. I said that I thought that this was a ridiculous way of looking at it. He said no, no, it is the experience of migration - you see politics in a vocational way. That's possibly true.

You occupy the very difficult ground between class and migrancy.

I find myself re-tracing my family genealogy, going back to Mayo and spending more time in Ireland. It's very interesting but perhaps not what we should go into in a political discussion.

But it has shaped your political trajectory and your take on the world.

I'm sure that's right, but I'm much happier looking at politics in terms of the shape of objective social and economic conditions. It's why I find Compass really interesting. Things are beginning to happen. The experiences of the last year have been, on the one hand, uncomfortable personally, but on the other hand they've helped to shape political discussion. I think there are now opportunities for coalition building and policy debate and a retrieving of certain conceptions of what the human condition is about - going back again to ideas that have been emptied out through the atomisation of politics. We need to have discussions about what constitutes a modern form of solidarity when we talk about migration or

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labour market insecurity or housing. These issues are opening up because of the contradiction between the language of New Labour and the empirical realities on the ground. Dagenham is the prism through which I see this. It's on the frontline.

Politics is about ideas, but also about power. I still detect a drawing back - let's discuss it but in the meantime let's leave the other lot to run the country and the party.

We've been effective but we haven't constituted that base camp from which to go further and agree some of the terms of that strategy.

Is that because MPs in Parliament are not talking about it?

Yes.

There needs to be some ideological cohesion amongst the MPs.

I agree with that.

You can get together around issues and make a big impact.

But then it's, 'Oh shit let's run for cover ...'

You've upset them ...

But hold on, we've just been through a very successful period. The Compass Programme for Renewal goes with the grain of what is going on empirically. If we can shape it into an organising and mobilising strategy I think we're joining the dots in a fertile way. We're in a period of transition.

People, even those who have given up on Labour or who refuse to vote for them because of the Iraq War, are wanting something to inspire them politically.

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Until a couple of years ago I was thinking about the Labour Party 'this is going, this is going, and it's not coming back.' But I'm much more optimistic now, and that comes from travelling round the country and finding that the basic social democratic disposition of huge swathes of the country is still there. It's a question of how we tap into it and articulate some of the issues and build a programme of change through coalitions and ideas.

I'm really interested in Ken Livingstone. He inverts the whole logic of New Labour in terms of power retention. His objective is to get power in order to alter the terms of debate and to shift the climate toward radical change. But he also acknowledges the complexities of the modern world. He is able to think about what constitutes a modern coalition that is both inside and outside the party. Increasingly I find him a key stopgap around issues of class and migration. He will defend the basic architecture of a modern, pluralist multicultural democracy. That needs doing. We've got good links with him. The next big campaign is to support him in the Mayoral elections.