

Editorial

Where's Labour?

The Coalition government are currently pursuing some of the most right-wing policies of any government in Europe. Their cuts are affecting the poorest members of society. They have done nothing to restrain the banks. The ideologically driven nature of their economic policy makes them apparently oblivious to its complete failure even on its own terms. They are planning to undermine the whole basis of the NHS. And these are just the headlines.

Meanwhile we on the left seem powerless, waiting around for some new ideas to emerge. What can we do about this? This is not a question only for the Labour Party, but we certainly need the Labour Party to become more central to the process of challenging the government and co-ordinating the widespread dissent that currently exists but lacks any focus. Many of the contributors to this issue address themselves to this question - with a fair amount of disagreement but a shared commitment to serious debate.

Patrick Diamond and Michael Kenny argue that part of the problem for Labour is that it must come up with a convincing public narrative of what was good and what bad about its period in office in order to manage its reputation, which has been seriously damaged. In order to point to its achievements it must own up to its major faults. Of course there are disagreements about what these are, but these need to be resolved if the party is to move forward. They also argue that the resources that Labour can draw on must include both its social democratic and social liberal heritage, and that it must also think more carefully about the constituent elements of the coalition it needs to stitch together.

The next two contributions are dialogues between people with different perspectives. First Neal Lawson responds to Jon Wilson's argument in *Soundings* 48 on consumerism, opening a dialogue on consumerism and capitalism. Jon's view is that people's consumption is frequently a social activity in which their main concern is providing for the material needs of loved ones. He argues that being anti-consumerist often seems to mean being out of touch with the materiality of people's

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lives - their basic needs, the places where they live. Neal's response is that capitalism forces us to express these humane feelings within a system that is fundamentally inhumane, and this has detrimental consequences for our wellbeing. Jon's counter-argument is that focusing on people's humanity and human needs can become a way of challenging capitalism to better meet those needs. Though both agree that a key task is to find sites of resistance, there is disagreement about the relative importance of identifying an over-arching power structure - the wall to be dismantled - or focusing largely on a search for cracks.

Guy Aitchison and Jeremy Gilbert come at the problem from the perspective of movements for change. Both agree that protest is an essential part of the political process and that it can have real effects in shifting the terms of political debate, but there is a difference of emphasis in terms of the ways to link these protests to the political mainstream. Jeremy makes the classic argument for an alliance between political party and movement:

what works is a combination of imaginative, peaceful, constructive, grassroots activism with a clear electoral alternative to the status quo. You don't have to co-ordinate them fully. We don't need Ed Miliband to say he supports the students, but we do need him to propose to implement a coherent alternative which looks more or less like something they would want.

In other words, as both would agree, Labour needs strong civil society movements in order to feel supported in its challenge to the government, while civil society movements need a strong Labour Party that they feel is representing them and addressing the issues in its own way within Parliament. But as long as Labour fails to provide a focus for such civil society challenge, they weaken the very movements that could be a source of strength to them, and continue to lose the support of people that used to form their natural constituencies.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the current battles over welfare reform. There is a very strong and confident disability movement that is challenging the draconian cuts to benefits that are currently being voted through, but, as Peter Beresford shows, its campaigners feel completely unsupported. 'As no one famous or in an official position has put their head above the parapet and told the truth about

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the welfare reforms - we must do it ourselves'. Far from being their defenders, the Labour Party put in train the processes which are now resulting in many thousands of disabled people having benefits taken away from them. This is one area where the Labour Party is in desperate need of new policies, and a recognition of the mistakes it made in office, including its collusion in and stoking of a popular sense that large members of people living on incapacity benefit are fraudsters. This is also an area where Labour needs to fight to change the political weather which they themselves have helped create.

Elsewhere in the journal Mike Rustin and David Armstrong's article begins a new theme in the journal focusing on alternative resources for the left, including revisiting neglected themes. Here they look at the debates on democracy, especially industrial democracy. And Aditya Chakraborty discusses the dismal effects of de-industrialisation on communities and individuals.

Meanwhile Phil Cohen and Mark Perryman have very different takes on national stories and the sporting imagination; and Engelbert Stockhammer shows how the European Union is still worth fighting for - if we can't beat neoliberalism there we certainly won't be able to tackle it in one country. Finally Doreen Massey shows how much we can learn from South America if we pay attention to what is going on there instead of listening to the constant flood of criticism from western media - who, as ever, are keen to prevent a wider understanding of any practical operational possibilities that point to a way out of the current crisis that does not suit elite interests.