Editorial

If the election on 7 May allows David Cameron to continue as prime minister it will be a disaster for the UK, but especially for the poorest and most vulnerable in society. Moreover it will sink any medium-term prospect of transition to a just and sustainable economy. The only possible positive outcome for the election would be a Labour-led government in Westminster, either outright or in coalition.

Yet the party refuses to inspire. The last five years for Labour have been defined by caution. Don't challenge austerity, focus on the NHS, and hope that 2010 voters plus disaffected Lib Dems will add up to a slight majority. This strategy is looking less and less effective, although it still may give Miliband the keys to Downing Street. But it misreads the times. This is a moment crying out for some political bravery, not retrenchment.

At the root of Labour's timidity are the influential sections of the party that continue to subscribe to the common sense that dominates current mainstream political thinking, not just across the three established political parties, but also in the conventional media and much political commentary. It is a neoliberal common sense, which sees parties continually tacking to the right in a quest to find a resonance with what they presume to be electorally significant public opinion. It is a perspective that overstates the political currency of the values espoused by the *Daily Mail*, and assumes that the mantra of TINA is accepted by broader swathes of the population than is the case. We continually hear from Labour the rhetoric of being a 'responsible party of government': a weasel position that justifies their commitment to austerity and is a shallow echo of the Tory project, which is based on moving ever further to the right on issues like welfare and immigration while maintaining their core message on austerity in order to tie up the perceived crucial middle ground.

Within such a paradigm, the key opinion polls are not on voting intention but on comparisons of economic competence. And the ways in which these are commonly interpreted in the mainstream press is revealing. When team Osborne-Cameron is pitted against Balls-Miliband on stewardship of the economy, the assumption is always that their rating is contingent on how close they are to the bankrupt centre of economic orthodoxy. But, although there is undoubtedly some support for austerity among voters, ratings are not usually based solely on politicians' perceived rhetorical

distance from a programme of deficit reduction and public sector cuts, or the extent to which they are seen as capable of carrying out such a programme. Instead, and increasingly, negative ratings could be read as signalling the distance of a significant section of the voting population from the austerity position itself - a reading that creates more problems for Labour than it does for the Conservatives.

This refusal to compete for votes on core economic values, and to instead share in a rigid adherence to austerity, has left both parties watching activists in England peeling off into membership of the Greens and UKIP, and in Scotland - en masse - to the SNP. The rapid increases in membership that have been experienced by all three insurgent parties bucks the trend in British politics for party decline, and suggest a longer-term shift in the political terrain. While it is highly likely that, as the general election sharpens opinion, voters will ultimately return to a binary choice between Cameron and Miliband, the insurgent parties are building electoral coalitions that are strikingly different from those of the established parties. One recent poll suggested that 30 per cent of Green voters would prefer coalition with the Tories rather with than Labour, while UKIP is re-orientating its policy (particularly on the NHS) to accommodate potential support from working-class former Labour voters. What UKIP and the Greens have in common is that they offer a fundamentally different analysis of the current moment: the Greens oppose austerity and neoliberalism outright, while UKIP transposes blame for economic woes and the decline in blue-collar jobs onto membership of the European Union, rather than globalised neoliberalism.

The austerity supporters in the Labour Party are still scarred by the long years out of power between 1979 and 1997. But, for a whole set of reasons, we are not currently facing a rerun of the 1980s. There is no equivalent of council housing to give away, no new discoveries of North Sea oil to fund tax cuts, and little appetite for foreign wars. The finance-dependent economy is no longer producing the surpluses needed to buy off sectors of the electorate. And if the next government manages to last five years it will almost certainly be faced with another global financial meltdown, to which Britain will be horribly exposed, given its complete failure to rebalance the economy away from the financial sector and soaring levels of private debt. Continuing with 'business as usual' is not placing a steady hand on the helm, but driving us into the rapids. When that moment comes, Labour, whether in government or opposition, will need to be in a position to offer a credible alternative to 'yet more neoliberalism': it can't simply be running on a platform of a slightly less cruel version of the status quo.

Another factor in Labour's timidity is their pervasive suspicion that people in Britain are basically narrow-minded and right-wing, and that governments can only ever do good things by stealth - hence a media strategy of sneaking through proposed progressive changes, like increases in Job Seekers Allowance, behind punitive headlines about cutting benefits to the under-25s. Leaving aside the accuracy or otherwise of the *Daily Mail* depiction of Britain, it's pretty obvious that this approach is a dead loss in terms of real, systemic change. Just as it is increasingly clear that neoliberal economics are incompatible with democracy, we can also see that the only force strong enough to reverse it is democracy. Without taking a leap, connecting with popular movements and trusting the public to stand alongside them if they stand up to the money men, Labour will go the way of its sister social democratic parties in Greece and Spain, equally as tainted by their capitulation to austerity as their right-of-centre equivalents.

Ed Miliband seems to understand this to an extent, and he has been at his best when he has stood up to powerful interests (Murdoch, the energy companies, the *Daily Mail*) and then ridden the storm they have created. This has also been when his personal ratings have been highest - a clear sign, sadly lost on others in his party, that it doesn't matter if things 'play badly in the press' as long as they are genuinely popular. Besides, it is clear by now, in the tabloids at least, that there is no middle ground to be found between Ed as the loony leftie who wants take us back to the 1970s and Ed the weak-willed idiot you wouldn't trust to organise the proverbial piss-up in a brewery, let alone run the country. Better to be Red Ed who might actually wield some power than incompetent Ed who can't eat a sandwich.

Miliband's recent stand on tax avoidance is promising, but we need more of this 'showing' rather than 'telling' politics, particularly when the enemy is as diffuse and complex as neoliberal economics. The film *Selma* shows how the civil rights movement in the US gained the moral high ground and pressurised the government into action, not by compromising with systems that were inherently hostile to them, but by dramatising and distilling incidences of racism. Individual African-Americans being barred from voting by clerks in dusty offices is just bureaucracy - but when hundreds of peaceful protesters try to register and get beaten in front of TV cameras, it is illuminatingly clear who holds the power and what their motivations are.

Neoliberalism, too, masks its injustices with complex processes and mind-numbing technical procedures, not least in the algorithms of high finance itself,

where regulation and legal oversight have been circumvented time and again on the basis the globalised system is so byzantine, and market processes so arcane, that no one individual can grasp its totality. Those trying to build a popular counter-movement have to struggle with this complexity, and find compelling ways to identify and reveal where power lies and who is standing in the way of meaningful solutions. At the time of writing, Syriza is carrying out this difficult work in relation to the Troika. What would have been an impenetrable technocratic process under any of the pro-austerity parties has become a daily drama of 'the people' - present in their thousands in Syntagma Square - versus the anti-democracy of the financiers: a drama that draws the battle lines and forces allegiances out in the open, as a wide diversity of players have to declare whose side they are on.

Being politically brave is a gamble, of course, and like any gamble it may not pay off. But, as the relative fortunes of Labour and the SNP after the Scottish referendum show, risk takes many forms. Supporting the status quo can also be dangerous. And how you play the game may matter more for your long-term prospects than any particular win or loss. Whatever the outcome of the election, without a significant strengthening of the democratic forces there is little hope of positive and lasting change. Labour can either take a punt and play their part in strengthening the wider movement, or see themselves left behind as it is built without them.

Lessons from Scotland

The political aftershocks of the Scottish referendum are still reverberating. It is clear that the vote is likely to have lasting consequences, not least in relation to a decisive impact on support for the Labour Party in Scotland - the one place where it increased its vote in the 2010 general election. But, more broadly, the 'Yes' campaign in Scotland has shown the rest of the UK that it is possible to build a radical progressive movement for change that seriously challenges the establishment even here in Britain; and, as several of our roundtable contributors point out, there is plenty of potential for the alliance that has grown up in Scotland to link in with similar forces in Europe.

The dynamism of the political participation during the campaign, and large voter turnout, shows that disenchantment with the political and politicians is not inevitable. A key dynamic here was the momentum that developed as a wide range

of people with diverse politics participated in the campaign - a momentum that exceeded the ambition and political limits of the official SNP-led Yes campaign. It is also important to note that this participation did not just happen. It was a major achievement, not least through voter registration/engagement campaigns by groups such as the Radical Independence Campaign, who were successful in challenging the political exclusions that are so evident in British political life, including in deprived housing schemes that have for far too long been ignored or taken for granted by Labour. And those mobilising for Yes frequently exceeded the initial definitions of the campaign - which may turn out to have its own knock-on effects, including in giving greater room for manoeuvre to the left within the SNP.

Labour's poor performance in the campaign, particularly the sense it gave that it was part of the establishment, has left it in a very damaged state in Scotland, both organisationally and reputationally. Scottish Labour are still very much responding to what is happening rather than shaping it, and this is symbolised by the limited nature of their contributions to the Smith commission. The campaign once more highlighted Labour's failure to construct a narrative of opposition to austerity, most directly symbolised by the party's vacillation over the 'bedroom tax'. It also put into relief the potential challenge for Labour of having to find ways of working alongside the SNP as a potential coalition partner - though, clearly, it offers the potential for a much more attractive coalition dynamic than the present one.

The roundtable contributors also point to connections between the independence campaigners and internationalist currents: a vibrant anti-austerity politics and hopefulness for a more just future were central to the character of the movements gathered around the Yes campaign. And the ways in which they were linked to the longstanding internationalist traditions of parts of the Scottish left was also significant. All this can be seen as contributing to emerging articulations between a number of internationalist forms of opposition to austerity. Although the situation in Scotland is fragmentary and uneven, the dynamic forms of political participation and organising we saw in the campaign suggest that there is a definite will to go beyond the limits of austerity politics.

Restoring the environmental question?

Environmental issues have seemed to be low on the list of priorities of both

politicians and voters in the run-up to the election, but a number of contributors in this issue stress the links between facing down the power centres of neoliberalism and addressing the urgent need for the decarbonisation of society. It is no accident that environmentalism has fallen down the political agenda after the disaster of the 2009 Copenhagen conference, as large numbers of activists decided - partly out of exhaustion and partly as strategy - to shift their attentions from the environment to broader questions of social justice. This was a bid to rebuild the movement on a more popular footing, but also to address the question of whether the planet could be saved from climatic disaster while supporters of the vested interests of the energy industry remained in power, and whether in any case it would be worth it if what remained was a brutally unequal society.

While the links between the environmental and social justice movements may have a longer intellectual history, this recent tendency in British green activism can be seen both in campaigns like UK Uncut, spawned by young people politicised through Climate Camp, and in the heavy emphasis placed by the Green Party on social justice. Three articles in this issue seek to further articulate the links between opposing neoliberal austerity and the urgent need for action on climate. Two articles from within the Platform collective detail, in very different modes, the complex links between the need for a new environmental politics - 'a new settlement' in James Marriott's words - and the difficulty of the present moment. James charts the life experiences of family members in his search for emotional and political resources for understanding the challenge of the moment. In looking to the lives of earlier generations of his family he finds pivotal turning points in their lives that help give a different perspective on the present.

Platform's contribution to the *Soundings* manifesto gives us some indication of the work involved in unpicking the alliance between multinational business and fossil fuels, pointing to the need for a just transition as we seek both to decolonise and decarbonise energy supplies; they put forward an inspiring strategy based on a virtuous decoupling from the carbon web through building the social movements necessary to democratise energy.

James Marriott, Platform and Guy Shrubsole all look back to the major social changes of the postwar settlement in seeking to find lessons from the past to inspire the future. Platform - who see one of the inspirations for the NHS as being the operation of the local Tredegar Medical Aid Society - argue that 'energy democracy can be realised by

scaling up from decentralised, community-controlled renewable energy projects, and using the state's institutions to pool and redistribute resources'. Guy Shrubsole looks to the major change heralded by the 1942 Beveridge report, and suggests that climate change is an evil of at least the same scale of magnitude as Beveridge's five founding evils - 'squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease' - and should be added to the list of ills to be tackled. A politics that acknowledges the centrality of the climate to social welfare, and regards addressing climate change as part of the basic work of the state, will be an important contribution to a new social settlement.

Prospects for change

Over the last eighteen months we have been publishing the instalments of the *After Neoliberalism Manifesto*, the final two of which - on energy, and on race and immigration - are published in this issue.[1] Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin's article in the issue, based on their concluding essay, seeks to draw out the ways in which the analysis in the Manifesto helps us to see what is at stake in the May election.

One of the key themes of the manifesto has been the need to understand political moments as conjunctural – to understand how deep structural movements in economy, society and culture are articulated together to shape any given political settlement. One of the main reasons for adopting this approach is that it helps us to also understand how we might contribute to bringing about moments of rupture – 'in which the different instances interlock in crisis and open up the ground for a shift in the balance of social power', as Doreen put it in her article 'Re-imagining the political field' in *Soundings* 48. Although none of the main contenders in the election have programmes that offer such a moment of rupture, there are now more grounds for hope for a break with neoliberalism than there have been for a very long time previously. In particular, as we have noted, there are signs that the economy is once more becoming an area of political contestation - something to which Syriza has been making such a massive contribution.

Although, as Doreen and Michael write, we can sometimes feel a bit 'marooned' in Britain, cut off from the exciting movements in Greece and Spain, there are signs that even here the plates may have started to shift – especially in Scotland, of course. If this does start to happen, it could be so much easier for a new progressive government to enact real change. The current Labour leadership does represent a

break with Blairism, and the more support they have from civil society movements, the more they will be able to achieve.

A number of the other articles in this issue point to potential sources of support for a politics that seeks to challenge neoliberalism, and one key ally will certainly be the trade union movement. The day that Frances O'Grady took over the leadership of the TUC was a big moment for many of us, and the interview with her in this issue points to some of the current signs of renewal in the trade union movement - against all the odds. The new focus on economic and workplace democracy that she advocates will enable the unions to play a strong part in putting forward an alternative to share-holder dominance in the economy.

Paul Salveson focuses on a different source of renewal – a reconnection with currents in English socialism that are embedded in regional identities. Paul sees these as offering a similar creative link between place and politics as has been seen within civic nationalist movements in Scotland and Wales. Jacob Mukherjee looks at the politics of Occupy – a movement that has slipped out of the news but whose activists are still involved in many areas. He explores the connections between political theory and individual participants in the movement in ways that offer useful insights for future organisation.

This issue brings us to the end of our manifesto, which coincides with the run-up to the election. By the time of our next issue, the shape of the struggle ahead - in the UK at least - will be clearer. For all the party's weaknesses, we hope that after the election the common struggle for progressive politics will be focused on steering a Labour-led government away from a damaging and destructive commitment to austerity, rather than on fighting another five-year rearguard action to defend the remnants of the welfare state from a callous and cruel Conservative-led administration.

Note

1. Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin's concluding essay will not be published in the journal as it is an overview of previous chapters. It is available at www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html.