Elections and political change

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Reflections on the *Soundings* manifesto and the elections

For almost the first time since the financial crisis of 2007-8, there seem now to be signs of an awakening of popular opposition from the left to the power of the market and the doctrines of austerity. This can be seen in the electoral success of Syriza in Greece, and in the rise of Podemos in Spain. Both of these movements have given effective political expression to a large population - especially a younger generation - whose lives have suffered serious damage from the imposition of neoliberal 'solutions' to a crisis which originated in neoliberalism itself.

In Spain and Greece the established social democratic parties have been paying the price for allowing themselves to become absorbed into the dominant system, and to function as its instruments, just as happened to a significant degree with New Labour in Britain (and as we have frequently argued in *Soundings*).

Intellectually too, there have been indications of a change in the climate of opinion, with the widespread recognition that levels of inequality within modern capitalist societies are not only morally unacceptable, but are also destructive of the equilibrium of the system itself. And there is a growing recognition that action must be taken on climate change, in particular to reduce the use of fossil fuels, even though this will entail substantial limits being imposed on energy markets, and on the corporations which dominate them.

All this poses questions for our analysis in the Kilburn Manifesto. Part of what

provoked this project was the fact that, while there had with the financial crisis been a catastrophic collapse within the economic functioning of neoliberalism, its ideological and political hegemony had been preserved intact. It was this lack of crisis within the ideological and political spheres that provided the conditions of existence for the reestablishment, after the crisis, of neoliberal hegemony within the economic. There was no serious challenge; it continued to be assumed that there was no alternative; that there could be a return, with the odd concession and adjustment here and there, to 'business as usual'. The Manifesto project sought to analyse the reasons for this continued dominance. (It is worth pointing out here that the Labour leadership itself has contributed to the persistence of financial orthodoxy in the UK, through its failure to challenge the view that the previous Labour government's budgetary extravagance was in large measure responsible for the crisis - even though all can see that its origins were in the irresponsibility of the financial system, not in excessive public expenditure.)

By the time we came to write the concluding chapter of the Manifesto, the ideological and political underpinnings of the business-as-usual model were beginning to look a little less assured.[1] Even within the UK, popular unease and dissatisfaction was beginning to make itself felt. And across Europe questions were being asked about the long-term sustainability of an economic model so committed to austerity. Popular disenchantment with the old political establishment was showing itself, not merely in a disinclination to vote, but - much more threateningly - in the rise of challenges from political parties to the right and to the left. This led us to ask whether there is now, finally, an emerging crisis of the political.

Gramsci's words from the 1930s are relevant to neoliberalism today: 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear'. Among these symptoms we might include the rise of the radical right, the stagnation of Europe, the impoverishment of Greece, and the counterproductive blunders of Western interventions in the Middle East and the Ukraine, which are combining to instigate a period of dangerous instability.

Since we wrote that concluding chapter to the Manifesto things have changed further. Syriza has won the national elections in Greece; and establishment politicians and the media are now also paying rapt attention to the burgeoning popularity of Podemos in Spain. Whatever the final outcome of negotiations in the

Eurozone may be (we write in early February 2015), Syriza has brought the debate over austerity/neoliberal economics into the heart of the beast. And it is clear that there are many others around Europe who support them. Syriza has opened up a political frontier within the economic itself. 'The economic' has been politicised; the possibility that there may be an alternative has been firmly put upon the table. Given that one of the main bases of neoliberal hegemony over the last forty years has been the effective removal of the economic from political contest, the treating of economics as a technical matter for experts, and the denial that there is any possible alternative, this could be a tectonic shift. Even within the halls of the establishment, there have been questionings of a more minor order, but still significant - Mark Carney's criticism of Eurozone austerity policies being but one example. It may not be possible to say that neoliberalism is facing an ideological crisis, but the dead weight of the dominant narrative has at least been challenged. We never understand until much later the real nature of any given moment, but we can at least now say that the economic crisis is not over, and that the neoliberal economic and social narrative is no longer so unquestionably underpinned by a secure ideological and political hegemony.

But what of the United Kingdom specifically? In comparison with churning in parts of Europe, the situation here has seemed torpid. It has felt a bit like being marooned. There are many reasons for this. Recently, there has been some economic growth in the UK, even though it is asset-based, still debt-ridden, and productive mainly of acute inequality. In spite of pervasive and shocking poverty, there are substantial parts of the population (unlike in Greece and Spain) that still feel they might have too much to lose by risking a radical alternative. The Labour Party, although still retaining a large presence, is often apparently immobilised, and unable to offer an alternative vision. (We have been saying this since the very first issue of *Soundings*, published in 1995.) And the UK lacks social and left movements (such as there have been in Greece and Spain) of sufficient strength and public presence to support a radical alternative. Nonetheless, the situation is far from stable. The major political parties have been losing ground for some time, and there is a major challenge to the Westminster-based political establishment from the nationalist movement in Scotland. Furthermore there is the rise of UKIP, which also represents a rejection of the established parties. Is it possible that the current Labour leadership could reconnect with the desires of the majority of its membership and a substantial part of the electorate, and begin to look for more clearly defined alternatives to the status quo?

After all, the Labour Party is no longer New Labour (though this is bitterly contested internally by Old Blairites - part of the reason, one supposes, for the lack of mobilisation). New Labour, however, did have its own sense of direction. While we have castigated that formation as a second phase of neoliberalism, one should note that it was also in its own way a coherent and intellectually-grounded project. It developed its rationale of a 'Third Way' between the free market and the state, drawing on the sociology of Anthony Giddens to propose a new compromise between the flexibility and dynamism of markets and the oppressiveness of government, advocating what it called 'active welfare'. By contrast, it is not clear today what underpinning conceptions of politics and society a Labour Government elected to office would have. However, Ed Miliband was elected as leader with the support of trade union members. And one can feel in the extra-parliamentary left a frisson of hope and excitement at the events in southern Europe. What are the possibilities for more radical change after the elections?

The May election

It is unlikely that reactions to the harms brought about by neoliberal hegemony will have a major impact on the May 2015 general election in Britain. But this seems a good moment to offer some reflections on what might be hoped for (or indeed feared) from this particular moment, and how the arguments put forward in the Kilburn Manifesto are relevant to it.

It should be stated from the outset that we believe that this is a period of inherent political instability - like that of the 1970s - when all elected governments find themselves incapable of managing the underlying systemic crisis. In the 1970s, when the old social democratic settlement was unravelling, successive governments could not find a compelling alternative. First Heath and then Wilson and Callaghan failed to achieve a way out of the morass. At the end of the decade Thatcherism took over as inaugurator of the new political dispensation, and the era of neoliberalism - as we now term it - began. We should always bear in mind that such instability and fragility might be the condition of a new government of the right as well as one of a more progressive cast.

Given what we now know of the neoliberal commitments of the Conservative Party, (and to a considerable extent of its Lib-Dem Coalition partners), there

can be no doubt that the return to power of the Tories or the existing Coalition would constitute a political and social disaster. In George Osborne's 2014 Autumn Statement, the Conservatives announced their intention to complete the reduction of the welfare state, and the role of the democratic public sphere, to pre-war levels. This confirms what was already evident, and is more widely true across Europe: that the agenda of deficit reduction and austerity, promoted as a matter of self-evident necessity, has always been a mask for an underlying purpose of achieving a fundamental shift in the balance of social power, subordinating everyone and everything to capital and the market. Plainly this must be resisted, as the worst of all possible political outcomes, although if it takes place no doubt we will find ourselves in a new phase of resistance and opposition.

Let us suppose, however, that we find on 8 May that Labour has the largest number of elected MPs, by a reasonable margin, and that it is set to rule (if that is the appropriate word) either with a simple majority of a small size, or in coalition with, or with the support of, smaller parties - which might include the Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru, the Lib Dems, the Greens, or even one or other of the Northern Irish political parties. What positions should be taken up in relation to such a government? What should we wish it to do, and not do? What criteria should be applied in assessing and attempting to influence its direction? How can the analysis and arguments of the Kilburn Manifesto inform these discussions?

It is clear, however much one would wish it were otherwise, that a progressive victory in May will not herald a transformation of politics and society. The potential for any deeper transformation has to be set within a long view. Nonetheless, this is potentially a different electoral moment from those that have occurred since neoliberal hegemony was established under Thatcher's watch. As Stuart Hall pointed out, the shift from Thatcher to Major led to only another version of the same thing, and the subsequent shift to Blair, as we know only too well, consolidated and extended neoliberal hegemony, giving it a social democratic shell.[2] Perhaps we can read the Coalition's aim as being to dismantle that shell, through what Stuart described as 'the most radical, far-reaching and irreversible social revolution since the War' - which will continue if the Coalition parties, or the Tories alone, win the election.[3]

This time, however, given the shifts we have analysed, a progressive alternative could be more genuinely distinct. Glimmerings could be offered of a different way of

doing things, and some ground thereby laid for more radical changes over the longer term. (How likely that is, who knows, but we can hope, and urge.) As we argued in the concluding chapter of the Manifesto, such a deeply-embedded common sense as the neoliberal one has been will not be undone overnight. But at least it should be possible 'to develop forms of agency, new centres of power, different kinds of identity, and resistances to the market' which could be the basis for a better social order and a different imagining of the relation between individuals and society.

A number of instalments of the Manifesto set out, for their particular areas, quite detailed suggestions about how this might be done. Moreover, as we have argued throughout, individual policies must always be understood, and used, as vehicles for highlighting more general principles, building an alternative common sense and establishing a real political frontier. Even immediately electoral politics should not just be about responding to existing political constituencies; instead they should actively seek, through argument and demonstration, to build new ones. The battle, as a famous woman once said, is about the heart and soul. We are going to write here about just three of those areas - the economy, arguments with individualism, and democracy. (For reasons of space we are not able to discuss other equally important spheres discussed in the Manifesto, such as race, gender, ecology, and international relations.)

Prospects for change

The economy

Unless there is at least a different way of thinking about the economy, and movement towards a radically different economic approach, any broader objectives - reducing inequality, having a more sustainable society, challenging the current structure of power relations - will simply be unachievable. In spite of the current extreme caution within the Labour leadership, the talk some while ago of 'predistribution' gave good hints in the right direction. Central to such a change must be a challenge to the dominance of finance, and the structuring of the economy around ownership of and trading in assets, rather than around production. The dominance of the interests of finance and asset-holding, together with the privatisation of public goods and services (which just like the asset-based economy results in increasing

inequality), have been central to that financialisation of the imagination that has been conjured over recent decades, and which must also be challenged. We argue, moreover, that policies such as a Land Value Tax and elements of public ownership in the banking sector have the potential - to an extent much greater than their immediate material, pragmatic effects - to influence wider behaviour, subtly inducing changes in the way we think. What we customarily call 'the economic' is in fact far more than economic.

The shift away from finance and assets (hardly so radical - everyone talks about 'rebalancing the economy') must be accompanied by a serious industrial strategy. We have suggested here a turn towards the prioritisation of investment in a major programme of green infrastructure, and in the sector of care. Both of these, apart from their plain necessity, would immediately signal a change in approach to what the economy should be about; and both would have the effect of opening up debates in a host of other arenas that have the potential for challenging the prevailing terms of political debate.

All this, of course, means facing up to powerful interests. Why not? Labour has shown that it can, sometimes, do that. Its leader stood up to Rupert Murdoch, prevented a military intervention in Syria, has begun to take on the energy companies, and is now making corporate tax evasion a central issue. These have been striking stances, and we need more of them.

Individuals and well-being

We believe that any challenge to neoliberal hegemony necessarily also involves a challenge to the spirit of possessive individualism, and a recognition of the damage that its doctrines and mentalities cause to well-being. We argued in our chapter on the relational society for the importance of an alternative conception - that it is through relationships with others that individuals are able to achieve growth and fulfilment, and that, despite what advocates of the markets say, the pursuit of self-interest does not of itself lead to social good, and is indeed often the cause of great harm.

It might be asked how such a 'relational' conception of well-being could be given some implementation through a political process. Our answer is that effecting changes to practices and policies is an essential part of challenging the pervading framework of ideas - the 'common sense' of the age. We want here to suggest two

domains in which such a relational perspective can be given a practical meaning.

The first of these lies in the recognition that, at many stages of the normal human life-cycle, vulnerability, and the individual's dependence on the care and concern of others, is normal and indeed inescapable - something that is not acknowledged in the neoliberal approach. This dependency continues throughout childhood - and applies also to the entire network of family, day-care, school and other systems that take responsibility for children, all of which need a supportive environment if they are to flourish. The transition from adolescence into work and independence is another context of vulnerability. This is a transition which for young people in many countries has been allowed to fall into catastrophe, because of the lack of jobs and opportunities, and it is ill-supported even in less damaged economies like Britain's. Then we have the normal occurrence of illness, both physical and mental, and the onset of old age, and the end of life, where dependency becomes unavoidable, and often extreme. The neoliberal belief is that individuals should provide for themselves, and their families (if they have one), and that 'society' should only become involved at the margin, for a residue of the very poor. Earlier advocates of welfare - many of them socialists - argued, as we do, that care in these vulnerable phases of the life-cycle is instead a universal entitlement of citizenship, in which all members of society should be regarded as equal, treated 'according to their needs'. Universal entitlement is also an important element in the construction of the idea of 'the public'. Systems of public care, which neoliberalism regards as an economic cost, should instead be seen as an essential form of production, far more sustainable and beneficial than the output of many material goods, let alone the activities of the financial sector. The proper valuing of such functions has deep implications for gender equality, since it is women who, in mainly low-paid occupations, do the largest amount of this work. Debates about public care mark out the continuing struggle between individualist and relational conceptions of well-being, which has by no means been lost in our society, and which remains a fundamental test of the integrity of any progressive government.

Neoliberal conceptions of management and power in the public sector also need to be challenged, including the conduct of relationships between government and its various agencies (many of which are now contracted private sector intermediaries) and those who deliver public services - for example, in education, health, social welfare. Systems of inspection and measurement have been developed in recent

years - Ofsted and its equivalents - that are widely felt to be oppressive and disabling to those who are responsible for the primary tasks of care. The ruling ethos of these regulatory systems is best captured in Foucault's phrase, 'discipline and punish', when it should be something along the lines of 'nurture, improve, and learn'. It should be possible, as some capable organisational leaders do, to combine the functions of maintaining standards and measuring outcomes with creating an environment in which everyone has responsibility for learning from experience and for sharing knowledge of good practice. A test of whether any real shift away from the ethos of coercive neoliberalism is taking place, under a new government, will be whether more developmental and nurturing methods begin to pervade the public sphere. This links with the argument for a dialogic and relational state which is made in Janet Newman and John Clarke's Manifesto chapter 'States of Imagination'.

Democracy

Historically, the principal counter to the supremacy of the rights of property (now capital as well as land) has been the principles of democracy - the entitlement to equality of citizenship through freedoms of speech and assembly, and universal franchise. But in so far as democratic powers have been embodied in the state and elected government, they have become severely compromised in the era of neoliberalism, even more than they previously were. Far from serving to restrict the powers of capital in the market in the interests of the people, we see the state having often become its instrument. For example, in the enforcement of 'austerity' policies, in the adoption within 'public' organisations of the management methods and profit-seeking ethos of the private sector, in the biases imposed on governmental processes by corporate finance and lobbying and the power of privately-owned media. And increasingly, under both Labour and Coalition governments, we see the state transferring its own (indeed our own) powers, functions and property to the private sector, thus adding to inequalities of both power and wealth.

The enhancement of democratic powers and functions is one of the most essential elements in any roll-back of neoliberal dominance. One aspect of this must be the decentralisation of the functions of government itself, through a re-empowering of elected local government, the positive effects of which we saw in the days of the Greater London Council. Devolution can make space for the emergence

of new political agencies - the scale of involvement in the Scottish Referendum, or in Greece and Spain with the rise of Syriza and Podemos, shows what can happen when people feel that democratic power is made real. Devolved powers are one development which a progressive government should support.

The other side of this is the excessive centralisation of the government in Britain (at least prior to the movements for Scottish and Welsh devolution) and the economic and cultural domination of the country by the powers centred on London and the South-East. The 'North-South divide' in Britain is reflected in almost every kind of investment (for example transport infrastructure and cultural commitments) and almost every indicator of well-being. Redressing such regional inequalities would itself be a step towards a more equal society. Reducing the domination of finance is an essential part of this.

It has always been a limitation of democratic theory and practice in Britain that popular empowerment has been primarily conceived as being exercised through parliamentary government, and through the long, tortuous and hierarchical delegation of powers that this entails. This was the 'Fabian illusion' of British Labourism. In effect, for most citizens, democratic entitlement amounts to little more than casting a vote every few years, and this in the context of a 'first past the post' electoral system, and a deep estrangement between representative institutions and their formalities, which greatly limits democratic voice.

To be effective, democracy needs to go 'all the way down', into people's everyday experiences of work and civic activity, instead of being confined to the restricted sphere of official 'politics'. There needs for example to be a challenge to the rules of corporate governance, such that a large number of stakeholders - who should include employees and representatives of the public interest as well as the owners of capital - are able to gain some say in corporate decision-making. (This 'stakeholder' model of governance has long been advocated as a response to the dysfunctional short-termism and undue financial dominance of Britain's economic system.) The Manifesto chapter 'Energy after neoliberalism' shows in detail how democratic power could be exercised in one particular sector.[4] Such 'internal democratisation' should also be extended to public agencies. One of the reasons for the popular appeal of the consumer market place is indeed that it often seems more responsive to individual choices than many contexts which are ostensibly 'public' in their ethos.

We do not pretend that the development of a fully democratic culture, and the

capabilities and practices which can sustain this, will be straightforward or simple. Much will have to be learned before a society that has been deeply shaped by possessive individualism becomes essentially democratic in its expectations and its way of life. But this is the direction in which we need to go, and which we should look to a new elected government to push forward.

It is essential, too, that the left outside parliament is also strengthened as new alternatives to neoliberalism become more apparent. We need movements and alliances in Britain that can help to sustain a progressive momentum in government, and analytical tools that can assist us all in facing the challenge.

February 2015

Doreen Massey and **Michael Rustin** are founding editors of *Soundings* and co-editors of *After Neoliberalism: the Kilburn Manifesto*.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin, *After Neoliberalism: the Kilburn Manifesto*, Lawrence & Wishart 2015. Online at: www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/manifesto.html.

2. Stuart Hall, 'Interpreting the crisis', *Soundings* 44, spring 2010.

3. Stuart Hall, 'The neoliberal revolution', *Soundings* 48, summer 2011, p23.

4. Platform, 'Energy beyond neoliberalism', chapter nine in *After Neoliberalism: the Kilburn Manifesto*.