

Editorial

The tasks ahead

For most of us the election result was a shock, but in some ways it didn't substantially change the nature of the tasks we face. We still need to find new ways of battling against an environmentally destructive and aggressively unequal capitalism - and the common sense that sustains it. The result made this more difficult in the short term, but its primary effect was on tactics.

If Labour had been able to form a government with SNP support, there would have been more obvious and accessible faultlines and pressure points to work with. And a Labour-led coalition or minority government could have provided a basis from which to build a conglomeration of parties and social forces to begin to push back at the ever encroaching logics of marketisation and individualisation. We could have started to explore the possibilities of different left practices and imaginations - embracing new forms of collectivity and networks of solidarity, and ways to repurpose the economy towards sociality, care, and participation, as well as finding sustainable ways to increase productivity that could lead to material benefits for all, not sharply increased returns for a few.

With a Conservative majority government we still need to do those things - though of course the organisational difficulties are greater, and the most vulnerable in society are at much greater risk.

There is a danger that the left in Britain will now spend more time on the defensive, seeking to protect the remnants of social democracy. Instead we need to focus on serious critical work as well as activism, and continue our efforts towards creating a new politics. In order to do this we must take account of the massive changes that have transformed the political landscape in the last few decades, including the constant diversification of the terrain - for example through new forms of connection to place and generation - and major shifts within the norms and expectations embedded in the social settlement. These shifts can only intensify in the next five years and we need to get to grips with them.

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This multiplication of identifications is nowhere more evident than in people's experiences of class. These are no longer solely based on location in the labour market: for example, the nature of the assets owned within a family has become of growing importance. The new contradictions and complexities require new approaches to building solidarity across different groups. Bland commitments to social democracy - such as 'we all love the NHS' - are not enough to hold the necessary alliances together.

Staying with the example of family assets: after thirty years of minimal public investment in housebuilding, homeowners - especially those who are able to finance their children's entry into the property market - *do* in fact have conflicting interests with those campaigning for social housing or rent caps, regardless of their common reliance on public health care. Already, policy announcements by the new government indicate that it will do all it can to exacerbate this conflict. It is only by acknowledging such differences that new alliances can be conceived of and constructed.

We also need to think again about the way we deal with the idea of austerity. The widespread acceptance of the concept of austerity marks an ideological victory for the right, whose fiscal rhetoric has never been matched by policy: apart from in the crisis countries, especially those under great pressure on the periphery, European governments have always found space for politically motivated tax cuts, or pay-offs for electorally significant portions of the population. As Lynda Dyson argues in her article on higher education, austerity operates as an ideology. It is often used as a means of justifying the withdrawal of funds from specific parts of the public sector in order to use the same money to subsidise the private sector operators in the field from which the funds have been switched.

Furthermore, an emphasis on anti-austerity focuses on what is no more than the current face of the longstanding enemy: even if we defeated austerity, neoliberalism could still remain hegemonic, though it might be forced to reconfigure. In our focus on austerity we focus on the crisis, not the cause of it. If we are to tackle the problems of the current conjuncture it is the neoliberal social settlement we must change, not simply its self-manifestation as crisis.

The great battle against austerity has largely involved us in a Ground-Hog-Day style argument with a right for whom austerity was only ever the moral argument, never the political reality - and whose values we reinforce as dominant every time

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we oppose them within their own terms. There are some European countries whose national debts severely limit their room for manoeuvre, but the UK is not one of them.

In the UK privatisation is steadily eroding what is left of public provision, as Stephanie Polsky graphically describes in her article on housing, and the cuts are very real and fall cruelly on the most vulnerable, as shown by Elena Vacchelli's article on the women's voluntary sector. But this is a function of political choices, not coercive necessity. Indeed, Andy Benson, in an article that looks at the wider problems in the voluntary sector, convincingly makes the case that the voluntary sector has itself been deliberately sucked into successive governments' plans to privatise the delivery of welfare provision - and as a result is in danger of itself being completely destroyed. In short our problem is not 'austerity' but a wider political project, one of whose aims is to restructure the public sector.

In the UK austerity myths have been one way of keeping on board those whose ways of living with neoliberalism are based on what Jeremy Gilbert calls 'disaffected consent'. As Jeremy argues, most ordinary people are uncomfortable with the gross inequalities of contemporary capitalism: they may passively accept that what is on offer is all that can be expected, but that is different from active support. Consumerism plays a large part in sustaining such consent - which neatly corresponds to the requirements of the cutting-edge tech companies and financiers of the new global elite: Apple and Google disseminate the ideology, while hedge funds in London and New York feed off the dominance of finance within the economy.

Jeremy argues that disaffected consent is quite sufficient for the maintenance of hegemony for the contemporary global elite: overwhelming enthusiasm is not necessary. Understanding how the common sense that keeps this elite in power is reproduced - for example through the ideology of austerity - is crucial if we are to counter it through building alliances based on a different set of ideas.

Phil Cohen offers a complementary way of understanding common sense: he urges an 'uncommon sense' that can rupture the endless celebration - and underpinning anxiety - that defines late capitalism in Britain. He believes that the currently dominant cultural mood could be characterised as an inversion of Gramsci's famous mantra - pessimism of the intellect has been replaced by an empty intellectual optimism, while optimism of the will has been replaced by a deeply disempowering pessimism, including on the left. Phil identifies an urgent need

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for greater intellectual clarity if we are to avoid succumbing to this pessimism. He argues that a new politics of hope must be based on comprehending the extent of the difficulties we face, but also recognising that our current battles take place within a historical perspective of longer duration.

The continuing collapse of social democracy across Europe is one of the main reasons for current pessimism. So we need to understand why this is happening. Put at its simplest, it is because the basis for the social contract that underpinned social democracy has now ceased to be tenable. The financial crash signalled the end of the social democratic fantasy that, under conditions of unchallenged globalised capitalism, de-industrialised countries no longer committed to full employment could siphon off a portion of the surpluses of growth to pay for welfare. This has paralysed European social democrats, including the Labour Party: this is why they have been unable to put forward an alternative to the right's solution of dismantling welfare provision altogether.

But there are alternative strategies, and thus a potential for hope. Although in Greece the Syriza-led government faces austerity measures imposed from the outside, it has come up with solutions that are based on a real political alternative. And, as Marina Prentoulis argues in her guest contribution to this editorial, it has shown that it is possible to build a popular alliance based on challenging neoliberal nostrums.

Theorists in both Syriza and Podemos (drawing substantially on the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe) have made efforts to shift the register of the left, and to build a new radical populism based on the construction of an antagonism between the people and the elite. These ideas, from which we in Britain have much to learn, are discussed further in this issue's roundtable on European alternatives.

Over the next decade there will be a need for a new formation of the British left. Under the Tory government there will be continued attempts - legal and coercive, ideological and cultural - to undermine opposition. The intensified assault on trade union rights in the Queen's Speech is likely to be a harbinger of things to come in this regard. The right's failure to find any solution to the current continuing economic crisis may lead it to rely on greater coercion, as even disaffected consent becomes more difficult to maintain. We need to find a way to build new alliances that offer different solutions.

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In the next few years the human rights movement will be an important part of such an alliance. Francesca Klug points to the hypocrisy of current patriotic celebrations of Magna Carta as the foundation of all liberties by a government that is intent on repealing the Human Rights Act. Human rights campaigners play a crucial role in defending outsiders and the most marginalised people in society, and they will also be invaluable allies in protecting the civil liberties that make protest possible.

Diarmaid Kelliher's article documents the alliances that helped sustain the miners during their year-long strike from 1984 to 1985. Although the strike eventually failed, the labour movement tradition of solidarity could still bring many people together at that time. But Thatcher's attacks had already weakened the unions, and the defeat of the miners weakened them still further. Diarmaid argues that recent commemorations of the strike, especially the film *Pride*, show that the movement had the potential to embrace difference - and they remind us of a tradition of solidarity from which we can still draw inspiration.

Notes from Scotland

One place where the political terrain on the left/centre-left has changed in decisive ways over the last few years is Scotland, and there are also lessons to be learned from these experiences. The impact of the May election result in Scotland - evocatively described by the late Charles Kennedy as 'the night of the long *sgian dubhs*' [traditional Scots knives] - cannot be over-estimated. There are many reasons for the devastating result for Scottish Labour, but one of them was certainly their decision to ally with the Conservatives in the Referendum campaign. There is no more tragic episode in Labour's long journey of decline as the party of the people than its decision to fall in line as an integral part of the unionist establishment.

The Conservatives' whole political strategy is founded on exacerbating division, in Scotland as elsewhere, and this makes it all the more important for the left to find a language capable of overcoming our divisions, in a way that refuses both Scottish exceptionalism and a One-Nation approach that glosses over differences. To achieve this requires positive and constructive engagement with a more plural left politics across the UK. The emergence of a left potentially made up of Greens, Plaid Cymru, the SNP and the SDLP, as well as the left within the Labour Party and movements

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beyond formal politics, presents us with both challenges and opportunities. One challenge, as ever, will be the pressures that 'labourism' exerts, most notably the difficulty that the Labour Party has in positioning itself as one part of a broad constellation of progressive forces, rather than as a single dominating actor. But it is important to carry on the dialogue with Labour, not least because if the Labour Party doesn't change there is little hope for the rest of the left.

At Westminster, the SNP is a powerful advocate for electoral reform - the first party to do so that would lose rather than gain seats under proportional representation. The big test of the SNP's commitment to pluralism will be the Holyrood elections next year. If they allow voices to the left of them to be heard during the campaign, they will significantly differentiate themselves from Labour. But if they behave as if they are the only legitimate representatives of Scotland they will alienate their allies at home and reinforce anti-nationalist narratives in the south.

The Scottish context also suggests some of the strengths and limitations of a political project mobilised around an 'anti-austerity' narrative. A key issue here will be whether the anti-austerity politics of the SNP remains a rhetoric, at a slight remove from its main policies in government, or whether its rapid membership growth shifts the party in more consistent ways to the left. At the very least recent events in Scotland have opened up a really interesting set of expectations around what an anti-austerity politics might mean in the Scottish context. The ways in which the SNP meets this challenge will have an impact on its ability to hold together the currently very broad alliance that supports them. There are important opportunities here for left voices in Scotland to push the terms of political debate, challenging neoliberal common sense and using this space to articulate alternatives.

The SNP has clearly been successful in shaping a broad coalition of support around a rhetorical opposition to austerity, but it is much less clear whether or not it will begin to outline elements of a broader left project that seeks to offer an alternative post-crisis agenda, unshaped by rightist assumptions.

Scotland is in a good position to help develop a broader post-crisis left narrative in Europe through articulations between different internationalist struggles, including movements of solidarity with Syriza. There are possibilities here, too, for articulating a different kind of European project, outside of the traditionally dominant framing of debates on Europe within the UK. Discussion on the impending referendum has largely been the preserve of dominant voices - on

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both 'sides' - that conceive of the European project in neoliberal terms, silencing arguments for or against the union that are outside of that frame. Challenging this narrow conception of European solidarity offers an opportunity to build an alliance based on a different way of responding to the crisis - though this will require a great deal of strategic work.

Notes on Greece (from Marina Prentoulis)

Negotiations are long and painful processes. For the past five months we have witnessed one of the most prolonged sagas of this type, between Greece and the 'Troika' (IMF, ECB, EC) - the creditors whose impositions have been responsible for increasing Greek debt from 120 per cent of GDP to 180 per cent, and who have imposed austerity programmes that have caused the social fabric to disintegrate. It has become almost impossible to imagine any political discussion within Greece or the broader EU that does not fixate on insider information or possible scenarios predicting the end of the process. Metaphors from Greek drama have been heavily drawn on, as if the negotiations are nothing more than a suspense story - in the Guardian of 22 June Larry Elliott described the negotiations as the story of 'Tsiaras of Athens', 'a gripping drama entering its final act'.

But the rise of Syriza to power represents so much more than the outcome of these negotiations, or the resolution of a cliffhanger. And even within the gloomy environment of the negotiations the importance of what it has achieved should not be overlooked. For, irrespective of the eventual outcome, it has succeeded in exposing some basic truths about the current European Union: that it is a union bent on enforcing the financialisation of the whole area - which inevitably creates winners and losers; it is a union dominated by a neoliberal agenda - and determined to preserve this agenda at any cost; and it is a union far removed from the 'Social Europe' many of us once imagined.

Syriza has rendered visible the extent to which neoliberalism dominates transnational institutions, including the EU, and the ways in which this is assisted by national political and economic elites. It has shown how difficult it is for democratically elected governments to escape the grip of those who represent the interests of global capital, especially finance capital, and how ruthlessly the global elite pursue their goals (not to mention the readiness with which social democrats

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- with a few honourable exceptions - roll over under their pressure). The current negotiations have never been only about different ideas about how to run an economy; they have been about trying to resist a dominant group that is seeking to impose its will.

And Syriza has also paved the way for the imagining of a new left, liberated from the defeats of the last thirty years. It has shown that it is possible to create alliances that articulate a popular desire for change. The EU elite has not lost sight of this, and nor should we.

For a discourse with such a short life span, neoliberalism has enjoyed a disproportionately powerful grip on the public imagination. But it is not difficult to diagnose how this condition came about. It is a response to a set of questions arising within a particular historical reality, marked by the end of the threat of communism, and failure to create growth that can sustain ordinary people's living standards while simultaneously sustaining profit. The collapse of communism, combined with the weakness of social democracy, is what empowered leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan. The financial crisis has demonstrated that the model they imposed is not working, but there is now a battle over what comes next. It is in this context that Syriza is fighting for a new politics.

However one feature of the neoliberal era has been the deep entanglement of all areas of life in financialisation; this makes it difficult to escape, either nationally or transnationally. National governments find it very difficult to go against the interests of international finance and their lobbyists - and so few of them try to do so.

This is one of the factors inhibiting the Greek government from taking a light-hearted decision to exit the Eurozone. Defaulting on one's external debt obligations has not been an uncommon practice in the past. Greece has defaulted on at least five occasions in modern times, the first time in the early days of Greek independence, in 1826, and the most recent time after the Great Depression in 1932. The reluctance to take this step by the Syriza-led government is precisely due to the problems caused by the extensive financialisation of the international economy.

Within an overly interdependent international financial structure, a default would lead to further problems for the domestic economy, at least in the short term, leading in turn to more disintegration in the social fabric of society, and potentially to political instability, which could have unexpected and undesirable effects.

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Although some people argue that these could potentially be mitigated in the long run, they make the decision for default a difficult proposition.

In this context, those who criticise the Syriza leadership for making concessions are wilfully ignoring the material conditions in which they operate. Negotiations require concessions, and the neoliberal internationale are formidable enforcers. What's more, the Greek people have made it very clear that they want to stay in the Eurozone. It is not acceptable to stick to only one part of the democratic mandate, simply because one prefers it to the other part. And constructing a popular electoral alliance is much easier than governing according to one's mandate in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

The next step for Syriza - and as the possibility of default remains open - is to reconnect with its grassroots, building the social structures that will in the future support more radical changes. On the transnational level, what the Greek people need now is an international refusal of neoliberal excesses, and a re-imagining of Europe as a place of international solidarity.

A number of different members of the editorial group have contributed to this editorial, and we are also very grateful to Marina Prentoulis for her contribution on Greece.

Apology: On the cover of the last issue Michael Rosen's name was reproduced without the n on the end. We apologise for this mistake.