

Editorial: critical times

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The September 2016 re-election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, with a renewed and increased mandate, was a significant political event, which should not be overshadowed by recent electoral successes by the populist right. On the contrary, these successes make it all the more important to understand the challenges facing the left. It is crucial that we succeed in making connections with an electorate that appears to be turning away from the left as represented by the old social democratic establishment. This is particularly important in the harsh context of the increasingly hard-right political project that is being mainstreamed in the rhetoric of Theresa May and her government. That this mainstreaming of the hard right is being constituted through relations between figures such as Farage, Trump and Marine Le Pen makes it all the more urgent to analyse and contest the terms on which it is gaining ground.

Corbyn's re-election confirmed that Labour cannot retreat from the challenge that his 2015 election made to the terms of post-crisis politics. But it also prompts reflection on his political discourse, as well as that of his leadership challenger Owen Smith - and, more widely, on the current possibilities for articulating a left progressive politics in Britain. This editorial makes a brief assessment of these.

It became clear during the leadership contest that neither the left nor right of the Labour Party is really engaging with the detailed work of developing a coherent narrative and agenda for a left politics in the post-crisis conjuncture, as envisioned in texts such as the Kilburn Manifesto.

The paucity of ideas coming from the Labour right is perhaps not that surprising. Their position is structured by an assumption that a few minor modifications can offer an easy route back to power: a little bit more credibility on the economy here, a bit of tougher rhetoric on immigration there - all, of course, without going as far as the 'mean Tories'. Yet November's presidential election surely dispelled any still lingering faith in the viability of the Blair/Clinton triangulation approach. Such a politics fails to recognise how significantly the political terrain has shifted: there can

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be no return to an (old) new Labour script.

Yet instead of seeking to understand the reasons behind Corbyn's election(s), and the broad support for him among the membership, large sections of the Parliamentary Labour Party have continued to treat it as a temporary aberration. This is what led them into the self-destructive leadership challenge after the referendum, which had the effect of drawing scrutiny away from the Conservatives at a critical juncture. For all the talk about 'electability', the actions of many figures in the Labour Party establishment indicate that they are perhaps most haunted by the spectre of a Corbyn victory in 2020, and will continue to actively undermine his leadership.

The absence of a stronger analysis and political project and narrative emerging from the left around Corbyn is more concerning. There have certainly been some signs of ideas that might become articulated as a coherent project, including some interesting thinking around the economy, and an attempt to draw on intellectual perspectives that offer an alternative to neoliberalism. For example there are some important emerging ideas about public ownership, and for challenges to some of the causes of precarity. But the most exciting thing about Corbyn's election and re-election remains the political space that it opens up for thinking about alternatives. And it is crucial that the broader left engages with and attempts to shape this political space.

One way in which these emerging ideas could be developed is through a clearer articulation of how they can resonate with resentments and aspirations at the level of lived experience and common sense. There are certainly political openings here, and areas where there is broad support for alternative ways of doing things. Two key examples are the widespread support that exists for re-nationalising the railways, and the significant popular antipathy to the marketisation of the National Health Service. A strong focus on these issues could help to mobilise support for a Labour alternative. (And although this is made difficult by the implacable hostility of most of the mainstream media, it is precisely this hostility that makes it all the more important to develop a more effective media strategy, in order to gain traction on key issues like these.)

More attention needs to be given to ways of campaigning that build on such concerns as 'educative movements' that can shift the terms of debate. There is potential here to shape a different kind of political consensus, based on opposition

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to neoliberal approaches, which are failing in all sorts of ways, and whose unpopularity reaches far beyond those who would directly identify with the left. A coherent left narrative is the best way of preventing the populist right from channelling this unpopularity into a politics of chauvinism and fear. (As Diane Abbott has recently argued, to adopt a 'UKIP-lite strategy' as a credible alternative for Labour, as some have suggested, would be catastrophic move: it would make a mockery of any idea that it is a party that seeks to be a leading force in society, and even in narrow electoral terms it is a non-starter.)

It is of course difficult to think hegemonically when your primary concern is with defending your leadership. One unfortunate effect of the second leadership contest - which was the outcome of an extremely personalised campaign from the Parliamentary Labour Party - was that it re-articulated the Corbyn project as being based around him as a personal figure, rather than being related to broader movements and ideas. It is to be hoped that the re-composition of the shadow cabinet will offer possibilities and opportunities for a stronger and more coherent project to emerge. It is crucial that different voices become part of the project of providing a clear opposition - and gaining a broader traction for alternative ideas and values.

The lack of a strong narrative and project for Labour is also concerning in the context of Theresa May's significant strategic breaks with aspects of Cameron's articulation of Conservatism. These present challenges for the left. Discerning the precise ways in which the May project is emerging, and analysing its successes and failures in moulding popular support and commonsense, will be an important task for the coming times. Many of the government's symbolic shifts are likely to remain just that - and they are clearly already being undercut by some of its apparent changes of direction. However, this does not mean that they can be straightforwardly dismissed.

For example, May's pledge that she will lead a government that is driven 'not by the interests of a privileged few, but by the interests of ordinary, working-class families' signals a potential break with the political positioning of Cameron, and may resonate with those alienated by his aura of effortless privilege. There are also challenges in the ways in which May has repositioned an emphasis on the state in relation to the market, most recently in her support for Nissan's Sunderland plant. This continues the strategic move on to Labour territory pioneered by George

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Osborne's claiming of the living wage for the Conservatives, and his investment in the Northern Powerhouse. In this regard, the shifting language of May's government around austerity poses a key challenge.

'Austerity' was always a weaponised concept. It served to directly transfer 'blame' for the crisis away from private banks and onto the public sector, and was deftly mobilised by Osborne to displace responsibility for the crisis on to Labour. And it dramatically served its purpose in disorienting Labour's strategy in the 2015 election. But for the present there are new challenges arising from the ways in which the Conservatives have broken with austerity, at least in rhetorical terms. The devastating consequences of austerity politics are all too evidently continuing, but the shifts in Conservative economic policy and rhetoric need a different response from Labour.

In his first conference speech as chancellor, Philip Hammond noted that, while the rigorous austerity measures set out by Osborne were the right ones for that time, 'when times change, we must change with them'. He was therefore no longer targeting a surplus at the end of the parliament. This is a clear testament to the effects of the economic uncertainty associated with Brexit. And it is also, arguably, evidence of John McDonnell's success in articulating a clear and persuasive argument that austerity is a political choice not a necessity. If so, this indicates the potential of a Labour opposition that is more boldly critical of the Conservatives than Balls and Miliband. However, continuing to define themselves explicitly as an anti-austerity party - albeit for good political reasons - carries considerable risks for the current Labour leadership, in trying to continue with an old logic while the political terrain, at least notionally, would appear to have moved on.

Finally, as can be seen in their stoking of the atmosphere of xenophobia and increased attacks on immigration, dominant elements of the Conservative Party are now adopting the clothes of right-wing populism. As in other areas, the extent to which this might become articulated as a key project for May remains to be seen, but it is clear that Brexit has already shifted the way the political terrain and its antagonisms are being constructed. A crucial task for the left is therefore to offer a different account of 'what this place stands for?' - to recall Doreen Massey's incisive political question - and to challenge an account of twenty-first century Britain that is structured by chauvinistic and regressive imperial fantasies. It is also important to remember, that, for all the frequent references to 'free movement of labour' - a

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term that is being bandied around very loosely - there continue to be significant restrictions on the movement of people. Attention needs to be drawn to the differentiated terms on which this happens.

In this context we see the following issues as particularly significant.

First, it is important to maintain international alliances, solidarities and connections in ways that can help shape a democratic and plural political culture against the Conservatives' 'hard right' Brexit. This would also help the continuation of significant political and cultural aspects of the European project - which always exceeded the neoliberal logic/imaginary of the Commission, and without which we will be greatly impoverished. It is particularly important to maintain and construct alliances beyond Britain, as actually-existing alternatives to the constrained and narrow geography that is being offered by the Conservatives. The positioning of Corbyn as part of a broader international movement against austerity and neoliberalism, whether in parts of Latin America or in relation to parties such as Podemos and Syriza, offers possibilities that have often been implicit but could be developed in much clearer and bolder terms. These strategies are becoming more and more necessary as a counter to the emergence of a hard right 'international' that is shaped by linkages and alliances between figures such as Farage, Le Pen and Trump, and is anchored in discrimination, misogyny and racism.

Secondly, there is the issue of alliances within the domestic terrain, and the questions that are beginning to be posed about co-operation between different broadly centre-left parties (and here the recognition from Labour figures such as Clive Lewis that Labour does not have the monopoly on progressive ideas or action is extremely welcome, if belated). This is not to suggest that there is a magic formula for an electoral coalition that can defeat the Conservatives. Rather, it is to suggest that there are a number of strategic opportunities for parties in opposition to the Conservatives to work together to oppose and challenge the emerging terms of debate. The joint statement issued by Plaid Cymru, the Greens and the SNP that opposed the xenophobia of Theresa May's party conference speech is a good example here: it shows a potential that can be built on. (However, the terms on which Sturgeon attacked May in her own address to her party's conference cautions against any straightforward alignment. While she opened with a progressive argument in opposition to racism, she ended with the resounding argument that 'Scotland's Open For Business'. The election of Angus Robertson as Deputy Leader of the Party, widely

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seen as a figure on the pro-business centre-right of the SNP, will certainly lend no momentum towards these kind of conversations, particularly at Westminster.)

Thirdly, there is the need to engage with the terms on which a right-wing populist project might be challenged and contested. There are clearly different ways of doing this, but one positive sign here has been Corbyn's principled refusal to echo the Conservatives' hostile rhetoric around immigration. Further, his appointment of a diverse shadow cabinet offers a significant alternative to the toxic politics of racialised populism. Other responses have included the Refuweegee campaign (a pun on weegee, the vernacular name for a Glaswegian), discussed in this issue by Teresa Piacentini. Popular anti-racist initiatives and support for our diverse communities are crucial, and can be directly related to the construction of a different sense of what our neighbourhoods, regions and countries stand for.

The opening up of the shadow cabinet also demonstrates the importance of moving beyond an obsession with the figure of Corbyn himself, to shape a broader collective politics. There is a possibility of constructing a political project in which Corbyn is positioned in relation to a number of democratic alliances and demands. And this in turn has the potential to draw in some of the many new members of the party: it will be important to engage this membership in creative ways that can foster participation. The extraordinary growth in party membership and renewed engagement with politics is a significant and welcome development, especially given some of the more pessimistic prognoses of the last few years of the demise of political participation. This growth makes it all the more important to resist any attempt to re-assert an articulation of 'parliamentary socialism' by Corbyn's critics, for whom the PLP is seen as representing and leading a largely passive membership. Indeed it is essential to do so, as we begin to articulate a political project that genuinely reaches out to, and seeks to transform, popular aspirations and common sense.

Despite all the tensions and difficulties, Corbyn's re-election offers an important opportunity to change the terms of post-crisis politics in the UK. But if the Labour Party is to develop popular resonance and reach, there needs to be more concerted engagement with the terrain on which every day common-sense is contested, and a more clearly delineated and articulated political project. If this emerges, however, it could have significant and long-term consequences for political life in Britain.

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About this issue

This issue opens with precisely the kind of analysis that is needed to support campaigners defending the NHS. In contributing the third article in our *Soundings Futures* series, Colin Leys makes an extensive critique of the neoliberal conception of health provision, and puts forward an alternative that could secure the future of the NHS as a trusted, properly resourced and democratically accountable service.

We also have an extended discussion of some of the political implications of Brexit, which begins to map out some potential political responses. (We plan a similar discussion on Trump in issue 65.) And the future of public ownership is also discussed by a panel of contributors.

Elsewhere contributors offer food for thought on equality (David Byrne) and meritocracy (Gideon Calder), while Steve Iliffe gives an interesting account of the recent junior doctors' strike. We close with a moving account by Ben Carrington of the central importance of Stuart Hall's work to his own development as an intellectual.