Editorial

Politics, place and left strategies

Dave Featherstone

The election of Richard Leonard MSP as Scottish Labour leader and recent disputes over the Haringey Development Vehicle in London may at first seem disconnected events. However, both developments speak to key ways in which the complex relations of contemporary politics are being - or have the potential of being - re-drawn, as well as some of the challenges of doing so. They also raise broader sets of questions for the left about the relationships between the local and national, across the different countries of the UK.

These questions are pressing and important, but they often do not get the attention they deserve. Mark Perryman's insightful essay 'The Great Moving Left Show', for example, offers useful reflections on the current conjuncture, especially in his argument that Labour winning the next election would see 'the creation of a radicalised majority that can embed a new progressive post-neoliberal consensus right across civil society'.[1] But his essay is also an example of a continuing habit of posing left debate and strategic questions in ways which pretty much overlook how they are articulated within the fractured (or fracturing) terrain of the component countries of the UK.

These questions need to be engaged with, and not just in the places that are at the sharp end of such processes and fractures. This is, of course, of particular importance in relation to Ireland and Northern Ireland, where the deal between the DUP and the Tories has meant that the terms of an already fragile peace have been treated as collateral for continued Conservative rule. This has seemingly put a return to power-sharing off the agenda - and with it a return to devolved government,

for the foreseeable future - something further underlined by the casual attitude of Conservative Brexiteers to the return of a hard border.

There also remain significant questions about the articulation of a Corbyn Labour project, often informed by a strong metropolitan focus, with political forces in other parts of the UK, such as Scotland and Wales. These questions clearly have electoral implications, but the way they are resolved and negotiated also has important implications for the kinds of left politics, projects and agendas that are emerging, and therefore warrants sustained reflection.

Scottish trajectories

Since devolution in 1999 there have been important openings for left politics - including the election of a significant number of Scottish Socialist MSPs in 2003. And devolution has also thrown up important political challenges, not least the need to address the ways in which different parts of Labour relate to each other. While Labour in Wales under Rhodri Morgan pioneered a strategy of differentiation from New Labour in Westminster, memorably dubbed 'Clear Red Water', Scottish Labour has tended to be more muted in its articulation of a distinct political strategy - though it has shared with Wales a number of divergences from UK Labour policy, especially in relation to the health service and marketisation. More recently, however, Scottish Labour has tended towards something of a reverse of a 'Clear Red Water' strategy: with Jim Murphy, and to a lesser extent Kezia Dugdale, seeking to position the Scottish party as decisively to the right of both UK Labour and the SNP.

The 2017 general election result, however, indicated that it was precisely an embrace of the Corbyn agenda that offered the possibility of renewal. In this context Richard Leonard's victory in the Scottish Labour leadership election signals a potential rupture in the centrist leanings of Labour in Scotland. While media depictions of Leonard as a left-wing firebrand are wide of the mark, as an ex-GMB official with a strong rooting in labour history, he brings to the role a political commitment to the left and a grounding in the labour movement and other progressive movements in Scotland. This is also reflected in his commitment to developing a clear industrial strategy - and his adoption of a political language and analysis which directly challenges inequalities rather than the depoliticised language of opportunity which framed New Labour.

In any effort to effectively align - and articulate - Scottish Labour with progressive UK left politics, though, Leonard faces some difficult challenges. Foremost among these is a parallel with Corbyn's problems at Westminster level: the majority of Scottish Labour MSPs are centrist, and many are explicitly anti-left. Another key challenge is to come up with a much more effective narrative on the 'constitutional question'. Labour has become bogged down in a rather knee-jerk defence of the union, which is anathema to many within the broader constituency in Scotland to which Corbyn appeals. Both Leonard and Neil Findlay, the other prominent Labour MSP left-winger, have tended to articulate a left-wing defence of the union, which means that there is a risk of foreclosing on the emergence of a more nuanced position - and new distinctive articulations of these questions. There are, however, potential resources here; for example Leonard's interest in the politics of figures like Keir Hardie speaks back to a broader tradition of questions of devolution and home rule in the labour movement.

In this sense, while Ewan Gibbs was right to argue in a recent essay in *Soundings* that the 2017 election demonstrated that the momentum of nationalism in Scottish party politics has halted, there are still big challenges here.[2] It is important to remember that a lot of the creative political engagement around the Yes campaign came not from the SNP but from movements such as the Radical Independence Campaigns, SSP, Greens and Common Weal - many different tendencies, some of which overlap with SNP platforms but many of which don't. This political constituency is diverse, and has much in common with Corbyn's support base elsewhere, but is unlikely respond to, or coalesce around, strong claims in defence of the existing union.

Positions around federalism might offer the beginning of an alternative here, but such a project would need much clearer articulation, and a clearer elaboration of the means by which a federal UK would avoid being dominated by England.[3] There are reasons for a left project to be 'productively ambivalent' about its relation to the existing form of the British state. But there is also an important political space to negotiate between, on the one hand, the SNP position, and a horizon placed firmly on the timing of a second referendum, and, on the other, the Conservative position of unabashed unionism. This offers possibilities for the shaping of a nuanced alternative position which speaks to those who want something different but are clearly unhappy with the current configuration of choices.

As part of a re-orientation of this kind Labour needs to adopt a much more nuanced position in relation to the SNP. This could have significant benefits for left imaginaries more broadly, in line with Perryman's arguments about the need to construct a post-neoliberal consensus. While the SNP is clearly vulnerable to challenge from left positions, it is important for Leonard to think carefully about distinguishing between issues on which to be critical of the SNP, and the kinds of political narrative that can be developed through engagement with them on other issues. It is also necessary to think about critique which moves on to a broader political terrain, rather than quarrelling about who is best at managing certain services - one that speaks to wider political questions and challenges.

The SNP's partial accommodation with austerity is an important terrain for contestation, and there are also aspects of its policies on health, education and policing that Labour needs to challenge - with the proviso that there are limits on what can be done within the terms of the finances of the devolved settlement. But there are also some clear areas where a progressive consensus might potentially be shaped, in alliance with some elements within the SNP, and the Greens, for example on climate politics and questions of trade union rights - areas where a broad anti-Tory politics might be more possible.

This also necessitates moving beyond Labourist instincts to present the party as the only authentic left voice. The construction of Labour as a progressive political force, however, also depends on a broad left project that can connect with the actions of the party where it holds power in local councils. This is where these questions intersect with the broader issues raised by the struggle over the HDV in Haringey.

Progressive localisms?

One of Doreen Massey's key insights was that the local does not take a particular political form, but is there to be struggled over and articulated in different ways; and that the terms on which the local is constructed have significant political consequences. And struggles over the local have certainly been significant of late: the debates in Haringey have been a key terrain for battles about what a progressive left politics might look like in the contemporary UK, and how this might be articulated with a broader progressive (multi-)national UK left project.

Rather than seeing the struggles in Haringey in terms of conspiracy or

personality, it would be better to understand the conflict as being about different visions of the local. As Aditya Chakrabortty has noted, this is a struggle over whether the local should be constructed as a terrain for big business, through its alliances with powerful figures in the local Labour Party. As he notes: 'The death of the HDV is a victory for local people over multinational business, for democracy over machine politics. Most of all, it is an inflection point in one of the great battles of our times: Big Finance versus the rest of us'.[4] While the conflict in Haringey is being shaped by the wider context of undemocratic austerity government at the national level, which leaves little room for manoeuvre for local authorities, it has also been a lesson about how to challenge a too-willing local acquiescence with the neoliberal agenda - and about how that challenge can feed back into national policies.

The struggles over the HDV, then, cannot be encompassed within a straightforward narrative about a centralising party enforcing its will against 'local' actors. What we have seen, rather, is the NEC allying itself with strong local opposition (which includes more centrist Labour MPs such as David Lammy) to a particularly unequal strategy of regeneration/gentrification.[5] The support of the NEC for local opposition to the HDV suggests, rather, that the project was decisively out of kilter with current efforts to forge a progressive left agenda to address the huge and pressing housing crisis in London and elsewhere. The conflict also suggests the importance of finding ways of supporting/articulating local Labour projects and initiatives that could be constitutive of a progressive left agenda.

The difficulties of such a task are underlined by the reaction of 70 Labour Council Leaders to the NEC's intervention: 'We wish to make it clear to the NEC that it has no right or justification to interfere in or influence the legitimate actions of locally elected representatives'.[6] Further: 'Labour councillors around the country are deeply concerned that, in seeking to mitigate Tory austerity by proposing radical new solutions, we face calls for disciplinary action against us'.

While Labour local government officials are clearly in difficult positions in relation to a broader context of 'permanent austerity', the ambition of Labour at local government level must be about more than simply mitigating austerity. And it is also problematic to regard as 'non-political' the pursuit of a £2 billion urban regeneration project that has been shaped by private investors with an extremely regressive track record. This kind of alliance with private finance cannot be depoliticised as simply an attempt to cope with the constraints of austerity.

It is important, too, to note that, while the local is often counterposed to the state (as in David Cameron's account of the Big Society), the local state/local more generally has immense potential as an initiator and driver of broader left agendas. Mobilising the local as part of an engagement with debates about 'democratic public ownership', for example, can help differentiate a progressive agenda on public ownership from the more traditional, top-down, versions of nationalisation. And this, in turn, can feed into a contemporary politics around public ownership as a new, diverse and participatory political project, with a strong potential appeal to diverse constituencies, beyond the usual left suspects.

Left politics has often had a strong distrust of the local, but the local has also been an important terrain of left struggle, and a place where important new ideas and projects have been articulated. When Aneurin Bevan established the NHS, he envisioned it as drawing on the traditions of the benefits/health societies of the miners in his native Tredegar. He even articulated the NHS as a project to 'Tredegarise' the rest of the UK! The local, then, can also be a site where more positive articulations of relations between different groups can be constructed and articulated. At stake here, too, are different ways of thinking about the relationalities of place, and how these might shape contemporary left agendas.

There can be no easy and smooth alignment between different places/nations and broader left imaginaries/politics. But there can certainly be ways in which working together across such differences can help shape an agenda for a post-neoliberal common sense. To achieve such a broad political project it is necessary to ask difficult questions about all these different forms of alignment and relationship. And the ways in which we engage with and solve these questions will have important implications for the kinds of political identities and relations that we generate.

Notes

1. Mark Perryman (ed), *The Corbyn Effect*, Lawrence &Wishart 2017, p31.

2. Ewan Gibbs, 'A divided nation', *Soundings* 66.

3. For more on devolution and regionalism see Danny MacKinnon, 'Regional inequality, regional policy and progressive regionalism', *Soundings* 65.

4. A. Chakrabortty, 'In Haringey the people have taken over, not the hard left', *Guardian* 1.2.18.

5. For an alternative housing policy see Michael Edwards, 'The housing crisis: too

difficult or a great opportunity?', *Soundings* 62.

6. 'Labour council chiefs hit back at national ruling body over housing dispute': www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/labour-party/news/92390/labour-council-chiefs-hit-back-national-ruling.

In this issue:

Where the fires are

Wendy Brown interview with Jo Littler

The disintegration of the social in the USA (and elsewhere) creates the need for a strong central authority to secure order and boundaries. Hence the rise of 'libertarian authoritarianism', a novel political formation that is an inadvertent effect of neoliberal rationality. In this context Trump and other right-wing populist forces can be seen as part of a further reconfiguration of neoliberalism. White identity politics and male identity politics play a key role within this. In the face of this persistence and resilience of neoliberalism, we need, not hope, but 'grit, responsibility and determination'. Small acts of local resistance have an important role to play here, and so too does political theory.

The final chapter for North Sea Oil

Adam Ramsay

To keep to two degrees of global warming requires leaving 80 per cent of known fossil fuel deposits unburnt. A decision is therefore needed about which deposits to leave where they are, and North Sea oil, reserves of which are in any case running out, is a strong candidate for being left. This should be accomplished through using some of the remaining revenue generated by the oil to secure a just transition before closing down the pipelines. In other words, there should be a (Scottish) state-managed solution to the problem of the inevitable collapse of the industry. Market-based solutions to climate change will not work: they leave decisions in the hands of oil companies that will go bankrupt if they do not exploit their reserves, and will abandon workers when sources dry up.

Editorial

Grime Labour

Monique Charles

Grime's cross-race working-class appeal is connected to a wider picture of changing identifications in urban areas, particularly in the inner cities, the site of the emergence of 'new urban ethnicities' and 'neighbourhood nationalisms'. Corbyn's leadership makes it possible to link with this constituency. The response by Corbyn and grime artists to the Grenfell disaster further illuminates this shared link with contemporary working-class neighbourhoods. Grime artists should be understood as organic intellectuals, taking on roles to represent the working class, theorise their position and offer them a means of political intervention. Unlike the Blair/Britpop relationship, grime artists' endorsement of Corbyn is from the bottom up, and Corbyn engages directly both with musicians and the communities they come from.

Eight years on the frontline of regeneration: ten lessons from the Enfield experiment

Alan Sitkin

The London Borough of Enfield is a pioneering local entrepreneurial state. It has worked with businesses to improve the local retention of work and profit within the chain that supplies the borough in the foundational economy. And it has itself set up a number of entrepreneurial ventures. This article draws lessons from the successes and failures of 'the Enfield experiment'. Perhaps the most optimistic lesson is that it is possible for local authorities to successfully run enterprises that benefit the local community, as with Enfield Innovations and Housing Gateway, property companies wholly owned by LBE that offer below market-cost housing, and Energetik, a plant which uses the burning of waste products to supply a district heating network.

The Russian revolution and black radicalism in the United States

Catherine Bergin

After the first world war a new black radicalism emerged in the US, partly in response to the racism encountered by people emigrating to northern cities. These radicals rejected the passive and assimilationist politics of older organisations and made explicit links between class, race and capitalism. Race was central to their understandings of capitalism: it was a transnational term that linked slavery,

colonialism, Jim Crow and capitalism. This was the context for black radical responses to the Russian revolution. Caribbean migrants were also centrally involved in the black socialist movement, and the pan-African internationalism of Garvey had some influence. For these radicals the racism of white workers was a serious impediment to class struggle, and black workers had an essential educational role to play in overcoming the limitations of their white colleagues.

From dementia tax to a solution for social care

Peter Beresford, Colin Slasberg and Luke Clements

Unlike the NHS, social care is both means- and needs-tested. Even Nye Bevin saw it as dealing with 'the residual categories' of people in need - older and disabled people, previously subject to the Poor Law - and its funding was from the beginning made dependent on resources. In a situation of chronic underfunding, the personal budget solution supported by disabled people has become an excuse to find fixes that make people responsible for their own care. But there has been no political will for the progressive wealth tax that could raise the extra funding required for a truly universal service. Yet social care could become a jewel in the service industry crown, an important part of an economy of care, and a creator of collective social wealth for society.

The causes of inequality: why social epidemiology is not enough

Michael Rustin

This (sympathetic) critique of Richard Wilkinson's and Kate Pickett's equality thesis argues that although the strong correlation they make between degrees of income inequality and the distribution of health and other measures of well-being makes an important argument for equality, its problem is that it focuses on correlations rather than causes: inequalities and their correlated harms are seen as respective causes and effects of each other. It is more useful to see both of them as the effects of entities which *do* possess causal powers, namely social structures and agents. To challenge inequality requires a recognition of the structures of power that produce it. The critical sociology that analyses power in this way has been displaced, however, and thus epidemiology has become the main sociological champion of equality.

Editorial

Contemporary African art in Paris: from *Magiciens de la Terre* to *Afriques Capitales*

Carol Ann Dixon

This article looks at four international 'mega-shows' of work by African and African-diasporan contemporary visual artists that have been exhibited in France over the last few decades, culminating in *Afriques Capitales* in 2017. These ground-breaking group exhibitions have showcased a wide range of paintings, sculptures, film and photography, mixed-media exhibits and installations. Each has made its own contribution to a better understanding of complex issues of race, cultural identity, citizenship, sense of place, nationhood and notions of belonging, and shown how these can be conceptualised, represented and communicated in the form of a fine-art showcase.

The concept of inclusive economic growth

Sylvia Walby

What would economic growth for people look like? Here the answer is sought through rethinking core economic concepts as part of an effort to change the narrative on economic growth and equality. Central to this a repudiation of the claim that there is a trade-off between growth and equality. Social inclusion is necessary for (sustainable) economic growth, while economic growth is needed for societal transformation. Gender equality is intricately interwoven in this agenda. Other conceptual shifts are outlined that will help to embed equality and inclusion throughout economic production and in the wider society. This article is part of the *Soundings Futures* series.