Editorial notes

> To take office in the name of structural change and reform without any accompanying consciousness and a popular mandate is to become the prisoner of the system.
>
> *Stuart Hall, 'Political Commitment', 1966*

Hall wrote 'Political commitment' when Harold Wilson was in office, and Nick Beech quotes this comment at the top of his article introducing the essay, which we reprint in this issue. In the course of his article, Hall also notes that the 'practical, pragmatic imperatives' that dominated official Labour Party thinking and strategy in the Gaitskell and Wilson eras had led to the wrong priorities and been a major cause of the weaknesses in the 1964 government. This and other similarities and differences of conjuncture are discussed in the further explorations of Beech's article.

But the dominant focus of 'Political commitment' is an effort to define the wider political sensibility of its times - 'Or rather, the absence of a political sensibility'; and then to discuss the ways in which the politically committed might tackle the widespread de-politicisation of the period, beginning with an assessment of 'what we have to work with … what structure of social relations we have to work with'. This, for Hall, was true political realism:

> I believe that socialism in this decade has been crucially defeated in the realm of theory and ideology, and that the undertow to narrow pragmatism and technical criteria of efficiency, while seeming suitably tough-minded and realistic in the short run, is just what, in the long run, has led the politics of the left up the garden path to No 10 Downing Street.

Side by side with the need for a much deeper understanding of the context of politics was the need for organisation, and Hall ends the article with an engagement with the movements he saw as the two most creative recent attempts to break with the prevailing consensus - the New Left and CND.

The contributors to this issue offer reflections on the current Labour government

DOI: 10.3898/SOUN:90-91.EDITORIAL.2025

in a similar spirit - trying to understand what is happening, and thinking about how to respond.

Will Leggett argues that Starmerism is an indicator of 'the increasing inability of political projects … to offer a sociological account of how the world is changing, and an ideological framework that indicates how they will shape it'. He contrasts this with the New Labour governments, which had a distinct analysis, and attempted to come up with a set of values to accompany them. For Tony Blair, however, understanding the nature of the 'New Times' (an analysis of the emerging neoliberal times that was initiated by Hall) came to mean accepting the inevitability of neoliberalism and adapting to its consequences. For Hall, as Leggett discusses, new times meant that the left needed to recognise new realities, but the political task was to find creative left responses and challenges to the changing political terrain. New Labour, however, 'rather than knitting the sociological and value wings together … ended up with reductive readings of social change that foreclosed structural reform, while offering hectoring and culturally conservative values for narrow psephological purposes'. As Leggett goes on to point out, 'the (potentially) fatal weakness in the Starmer project is that it 'lacks both a Third Way type sociological analysis *and* any kind of coherent value framework, such that the raw materials for a more progressive strategy - or indeed any kind of strategy - are absent'. This is the context for what he describes as 'a politics of nothing'.

Another way of understanding the current Labour leadership's politics of nothing is to see it as resulting from its lack of room for manoeuvre, given the party establishment's continuing refusal to shift away from its embrace of neoliberalism: it still leaves the utilities in the hands of profit-seekers, backs off from regulation of business, sees deregulation as the only way to achieve 'growth', and waters down its modest policy proposals in response to the demands of property and finance interests. A social-democratic party whose compromise with business has become capitulation will always have little to say or offer.

In his article Adam Peggs shows how even legislation promoted as showing Labour's remaining progressive attachments, in this case the Renters' Rights Act, has not delivered on many of Labour's earlier promises and commitments, while even now that it has been adopted into law, the implementation of many of its provisions

remains subject to delay and caveats. As he argues, there is no new dawn here.

Carl Rowlands sees Starmer's huge mistake in embracing AI as a cure-all as resulting from his desperation to find any source of growth at all in neoliberal Britain - for, in spite of all the concessions, there has still been no growth.

With nothing to offer on such a wide range of issues, Starmer has, unforgivably, abandoned any principled stance on migration and shifted towards a law and order agenda, in the hope of finding support on issues championed by the far right - as we have discussed extensively in previous issues of Soundings, and as Frances Webber and Joseph Maggs outline in their discussion with Kirsten Forkert.[1]

On foreign policy Starmer remains a staunch supporter of the global dominance of the wealthy nations. Mike Rustin's article discusses the resistance of declining empires to the ongoing structural changes in the location of power in the world, and notes too the Labour government's participation in this resistance, as well as the decline of voices of opposition from within the party. Kamel Hawwash lambasts Starmer's unrelenting support for Israel in spite of its campaigns of genocide.

Labour's abandonment of so many of its former constituencies has led to an intensification of already widespread and deep feelings of disappointment and disempowerment, and to a further disenchantment with politics. As Sarah Bufkin, John Clarke and Jo Littler discuss, a sense of powerlessness is a large part of the context for the rise of Reform; but they also explore whether the left has the capacity to articulate the structures of feeling they analyse into emerging new political formations.

Left responses to Starmerism are also explored in Nick Davidson's diary documenting his search for a new political home after his experiences in Corbyn's North Islington constituency, while both Bufkin et al and Rosalind Brunt discuss the wider range of 'lefts' that exist in local areas and beyond the parliamentary arena. Bufkin et al argue that the different lefts need to find ways 'to boost each other and strategise together, to interconnect and defeat the right'; Brunt argues that we need a new broad democratic alliance, in which the involvement of the labour movement will be crucial. Hawwash discusses his involvement in election campaigns in opposition to Labour, and non-parliamentary campaigning in solidarity with Palestine. The authors of *The Media Manifesto* and *The Anti-Racist Media Manifesto*, Natalie Fenton, Des Freedman, Anamik Saha, Justin Schlosberg, Francesca Sobande

and Gavan Titley, offer insights on how to respond to the mainstream media's failure to maintain a democratic public sphere.

As well as offering a devastating critique of Starmer's policies on immigration, Frances Webber and Joseph Maggs of the Institute of Race Relations show the importance of alternative institutions in maintaining the challenge to successive regimes of injustice. The IRR has played an important role in the fight against racism and for the rights of migrants since 1972, including through its many publications.

As Leggett argues, a values-based approach to politics based on an understanding of the wider context is still recoverable for progressive ends, even though the realities have considerably worsened since the New Labour years. There are ways to challenge the poverty of imagination in dominant Labour narratives, as well as movements that can counter their policies. In our next issue we plan to explore resources for hope in greater depth. If you would like to contribute to this issue please visit: https://lwbooks.co.uk/call-for-papers-soundings-92-cultures-of-hope.

———

Other contributors to this issue, though not specifically commissioned as part of the special issue on Labour, nevertheless engage seriously with the ideas and forces of neoliberalism.

Thomas J. Williams argues that Britain's border regime increasingly operates through routinised administrative coercion, as enforcement is dispersed onto contractors, delegated checkers and computer screens, far away from decision-makers.

Writing in a very different register, Zixuan Liu shows how pop musicians in China are disciplined by the cultural premium placed on 'positive energy'.

Angela McRobbie argues that gender has consistently been mobilised as a vector concept in the move from neoliberalism to populist authoritarianism, as she outlines in her charting of the different figurations of post-feminism, as well as the recent rise of the tradwife phenomenon.

Gholam Khiabany, in an article made all the more relevant by the current US bombing of Iran, explores the meaning of imperial gestures of 'solidarity' towards

citizens in countries that are the target of the West's interventions, as well as the selective nature of those targets.

Sally Davison

Notes

1. See for example *Soundings* 89, Authoritarianism and alternatives, especially Dave Featherstone, Jenny Morrison and Ewan Gibb, 'Editorial: Challenging authoritarian political cultures'; Kirsten Forkert talks to Kevin Blowe, 'Law and order: what can we expect from an incoming Labour government?', *Soundings* 86; Dave Featherstone, 'Culture wars and the making of authoritarian populism: articulations of spatial division and popular consent', *Soundings* 81.