The importance of persistence

Sally Davison talks to Neal Lawson

Neal Lawson has been a longstanding and consistent voice within the Labour Party arguing for pluralism and the good society, as well as a consistent advocate of progressive alliances, including during elections. He has argued for these positions as Managing Editor of Renewal, executive director of Compass, and founding member of Mainstream, among other organisations.[1]

Sally: You have been in the news a fair amount recently as someone associated with the Burnham leadership campaign - and indeed your longstanding campaigning has helped to bring the 'Burnham moment' about. This moment brings together many of your long-term preoccupations, ideas and campaigning themes, including pluralism/PR/alliances/the soft left/the idea of radical pragmatism/the need for a political project. You must be feeling pleased with what's been happening.

Neal: It's funny how these things happen, isn't it? What do you do in life? You just persevere, don't you? And maybe you might sometimes find yourself in the right place at the right time … but, really, only because you persevered. And now we [Compass] have helped create a necessary change. To defeat Reform Starmer needed to go, and someone better needed to come in, and we've got someone better. But it's still all to be contested. Is there going to be change or more orthodoxy? We have to keep going, keep on creating the countervailing forces of ideas and organisation. But at least there's now a leader with some interesting ideas, who thinks about some of the things we think about - PR, utility ownership, etc. There's at least some space to be opened up. Burnham's definitely not the Messiah, but he's someone who we can at least work with and around. And there is no one else. That's why it feels quite daunting, because if this doesn't go right, then there isn't anyone else obvious to take on the role. So we'll see how it how it

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pans out. I am pleased to have been able to play a role in getting someone better in, but now I'm focusing on what do we do about it now. My analogy is we've got to base camp but there's still a mountain to climb.

Sally: One of the themes of this discussion will be to highlight the contribution of Compass-style politics to the current political moment, and to explore some of the ways in which this links into what we night call a Soundings approach. There are many overlaps, but it is also interesting to see how people may have different ways of pursuing these kinds of politics. But first can we talk a little bit about your trajectory and how you've arrived at the place where you are at the moment. Tell us a bit about your political history, maybe going back to LCC and *Renewal*.

Neal: I've always been driven by thinking from what's traditionally been called the New Left. I remember being a teenager, and haring up to W.H. Smith to buy my copy of *Marxism Today*. And I bought *New Socialist* as well, which was a quite good theoretical Labour Party magazine. So I was fashioned from quite a young age by reading Martin Jacques, Stuart Hall, Eric Hobsbawm - all those people; and later some of the people that went off to form early elements of New Labour - Geoff Mulgan, Charlie Leadbeater, John Lloyd. These people fashioned my thinking from the first days of my political involvement . And the other thing that had a really big impact on me was going to the *Marxism Today* events in the early 1980s - there was a sense of pluralism, dynamism, freedom, space. I did go to some Militant events, but they just didn't have the oxygen or the space, the pluralism, of *Marxism Today*-style events. I watched in horror when *Marxism Today* closed down. But then *Soundings* happened, and people like Mark Perryman were doing a number of different initiatives, and I was watching what happened to the Communist Party in its different subsequent iterations. Stuart Hall in particular had a massive impact on me. The biggest impact was from his *Soundings* essay 'New Labour's Double Shuffle'.[2] I was reading it on a train going from London to South Wales, heading to a selection meeting for the Labour Party for the 2005 general election. I was about to tell the local Labour Party members why I ought to be the candidate in their constituency, and I'm reading the double shuffle, and it's all making absolute sense to me - the dual nature of the New Labour project. And I had already been having lots of critical thoughts about New Labour. Anyway I literally got off the train in South Wales, walked over the bridge, and got the next train back to London. I just thought, I

don't believe in this project. What Stuart helped me understand was the underlying nature of the Blair project.

I'd also read Zygmunt Bauman's book, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, which argues that stigmatising the poor plays a role in policing all of us: we other the non-consumers, the unsuccessful consumers, because we don't want to be like them, and this keeps us on the consumer treadmill. I wrote a book about the consumer society called *All Consuming* - the only book I've ever written. So Bauman had a big impact, and David Marquand's *The Progressive Dilemma* also had an impact in terms of how the progressive forces were split, and his pluralism - he was a member of Labour, then the SDP, and ended up with Plaid Cymru before he died. Robin Cook was also a big influence on my politics and thought, as were Hilary Wainwright and Robin Murray - the whole post-Fordism thing.

I joined the Labour Party when I was 16, in 1979, and got involved in Labour student politics in the early 1980s. And that meant the battle between the hard and the soft left, and you were either in or against Militant, it was very binary. I didn't realise then that the people that were against Trotskyism weren't necessarily on the left - they presented themselves as being on the left but many of them ended up being quite right-wing figures in Labour politics.

Sally: I think that what's called the hard left is a tiny group of people. You could argue that Kinnock was using Militant as a stick for beating up the wider left. The hard left can be characterised as authoritarian, old-fashioned, unnuanced, obsessed with industrial action, etc, but there are not really many people like that. That kind of characterisation gives you something to define yourself against. There's a long tradition of defining yourself against the mad/bad left.

Neal: You're making me think of that great saying - inside every socialist there's a policeman waiting to get out. I am very much a liberal socialist, which is why I'm attracted to social liberals - I don't see that much difference between the two. Your political journey is intellectual, but it's also cultural and organisational. I believe that means shape ends, so we don't cut corners and behave in undemocratic, tribal, cynical ways in order to get what we want. There are no shortcuts. Whereas other people, both to the right of me in the Labour Party and to the left of me, would do anything to secure power. They share common cultural behaviour. And my cultural

and behavioural politics is concerned with how you can behave in a way that prefigures the society you want to be part of, and not degrade yourself by behaving in in an awful way. If you do, you never end up at the Good Society. And really that's still the big cultural battle. In some ways this is the kind of left I mean when I refer to the soft left or the democratic left. It's about the way we do politics as well as the ideas you support.

So I prosecuted my politics through Labour students. Then I went to work for the Transport and General Workers Union covering the south west and they had like 150k members in one small region. That's where I met Gordon Brown, and I then went off and was one of his advisors before and after the 1992 election. He never took my advice.

Sally: When did you join the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC)?

Neal: When I was involved in student politics. There was also another organisation called Clause 4, from which I learned a lot of organisational skills. And from there I joined the LCC, and also joined the LCC executive, which is the space from which, after the 1992 electoral defeat, myself, Paul Thompson and Sue Goss initiated *Renewal* as an idea space for rethinking after that real solar-plexus blow election loss of an election we had expected to win. So I was trying again (and the inspiration for that was partly *Marxism Today*) to see how could we have an internal conversation in and around the Labour Party. That's when we [Neal, Sally and L&W] started working together. And it's a joy that *Renewal* is still going, and is probably now in the best shape it's been in, in terms of figuring in the news, because of Burnham, and it's been really pleasing to me that it's flourishing now, as part of the Compass family. I've helped produce *Renewal* for a very long time.

But then New Labour came along, and I was initially very enthusiastic about it - Blair, the overlaps with *Marxism Today*, the endorsements that were given …

Sally: The attraction was mainly the modernisation agenda, wasn't it?

Neal: Yes, but there are clearly different forms of modernisation, and there were prospects and hopes and possibilities for a left modernisation project. Will Hutton's ideas about stake-holding, and even some of the communitarian stuff … it potentially could have gone in different directions. In the end, it went - as Stuart so

brilliantly described - in the direction of an overly neoliberal form of modernisation. And I became disaffected with it fairly quickly. There was also something else we set up then, the first online think tank, Nexus. I've been a kind of serial political entrepreneur, setting up different platforms and spaces for conversation, and I went through the whole third-way phenomenon, trying to tease out of it whether it meant anything vaguely left-wing. In the end I concluded that it probably didn't. I also concluded that ideas are critical, but without organisation ideas are just ideas. And that's why in 2003 we set up Compass as a more campaigning organisational space for the politics of *Renewal* and the LCC. But I would also like to think that the ghosts and the influence of *Marxism Today* and *Soundings* could have a more organisational and campaigning force.

Sally: One of the good things about Blair - of which I think there were not many - was that he was also very interested in ideas. When we had the *Renewal* thirtieth anniversary edition in 2023, there was a discussion about which Labour leaders were really into ideas, for example Ed Miliband was, in a way that Corbyn wasn't really - or not in the same way. Starmer didn't seem to be interested at all. Whereas Burnham does seem to be someone who's interested in ideas. You have described him as an experiential leader - someone who has developed his ideas from political involvement, in his case, the practice of running Manchester.

Neal: That's my experience of him. He is definitely interested in ideas, but he's not abstract or theoretical. It's very practical, it's what he experiences in life that tends to fashion what he's thinking, which is then spliced together with his mix of old, new and left Labour instincts. I don't think he thinks about questions such as what is social democracy in the twenty-first century, or concepts like new times, post-Fordism or whatever, but he does think deeply about democracy, rewiring the state and political economy in a slightly more practical way. Maybe it's up to others to mesh that together into something which speaks more theoretically about Burnhamism, or Manchesterism, or whatever else you want to call it.

Sally: Yes, you need people who spend a lot of time thinking about politics, and you also need people who want to be informed by that. You are someone who organises as well as engages with ideas - you do both those things. On this note let's go back to Compass.

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Neal: The idea for Compass in 2003 was 'let's keep on with the ideas and the framing, but let's develop a membership organisation that could campaign and fight for those ideas in and around Labour'. And at first it tried to be New Labour's best critical friend, saying 'we think things are heading in the wrong direction. This is the right direction.' But, very, very quickly that tipped into just stopping them privatising the post office, trying to stop them from setting up academies and foundation schools, or renewing Trident or going to a war with Iraq. It became a blocker thing. Which is fine, because that was the thing that needed to be done as we continued to fall out of love with Blairism. In the process of doing all that work, we were always relatively plural and open - we were working on campaigns and issues with people such as Caroline Lucas. And so it became increasingly apparent to us that our membership rule that said you effectively had to be a member of the Labour Party to be in Compass was out of kilter with our practice and our culture. So Caroline, who we really liked and shared so much with, couldn't be a member of Compass, but Peter Mandelson, who we shared nothing with, could be. We realised this was crazy, given all the challenges coming down the track, with Labour looking less and less intellectually curious, and the need for a future-orientated politics. We knew we had to let people in from the Greens, social liberals, whoever, not just Labour people. That just seemed to me to be a natural grown-up step to take. We didn't realise how cross the Labour Party, or some people in it, would be, because we were challenging their monopoly of position on the left. Anyway, fifteen years ago, in 2011, we opened up the membership. In a way we anticipated - and wanted - a multi-party politics. You couldn't navigate and negotiate your way around unless you had green voices, unless you had social liberal voices, and Labour was becoming too brittle and too narrow. It feels like that decision has been somewhat vindicated, given current multi-party politics - five parties in England, six parties in Wales and Scotland. Of course, that's going to ebb and flow, depending on polls, leaders, issues, etc. But we're never going to go back to 1951, when 98 per cent of the country was voting for one of the two main parties. I look at the political field now and see it as being incredibly precarious. Burnham might work or he might not work. Farage is a very brittle character, and Reform is not a mature party, it could easily break up and fall away. The Tories are finding it difficult - though Badenoch is trying to keep them in the game - to find a big intellectual cultural project. Zack Polanski's done amazing things with the Greens, but, again, it's an immature party based around a particularly charismatic leader figure, with all the upsides and all the downsides of

that. You've got Plaid Cymru, which might work out in Wales or not. You've got the SNP, which doesn't feel very intellectually or culturally energetic. The field is weak and fragmented: how do you knit the best bits of that together? Compass is an entity that can help try to do that. Or you end up with a Reform-led government.

Sally: Could you say something more about the Progressive Alliance? Because, obviously, there's a lot of people who think it's a good idea to vote tactically, whose main aim is to keep out Reform, or the Tories, or whoever it may be. Compass has consistently campaigned on that - at election times it has really helped people to think through how to do those alliances.

Neal: The UK's first-past-the-post voting system rewards the one party in a seat that can get one more vote than the second placed party; and it is designed to engender a two-party system. But despite the fact that all the incentives are for two parties, we've got this breakup, because people have got different identities, and Labour isn't satisfying the left bloc - Labour isn't providing what they need, so they are going to Greens, SNP, Plaid, et cetera, et cetera. Even in the right bloc, the Tories have lost their monopoly. And so it's all contested. It's really problematic to work out what progressives do at elections, though, and so we've tried different things. We've tried stand-asides, which we did in 2017, where the Greens very generously stood aside for Labour candidates, but got nothing back in return; quite rightly they were furious about it, and don't want to do that again, and that's absolutely understandable. In 2024 the efforts were more around targeting particular seats and getting commitments from whoever was the progressive candidate around PR, but obviously that's mostly about Labour people, because the Greens and Liberal Democrats are already committed to PR.

The problem is the coercive power of First-Past-the-Post. Labour know many progressive voters don't like them, but while they are the least bad option, enough people will hold their nose to keep Reform out. Labour can win but only by promising not to change much and therefore attract centre-right voters too. We have to break this downward spiral.

So we're trying to think through how to organise ourselves in a way that isn't based solely on tactical voting - which doesn't build voter power but simply gives away votes for free to candidates who take progressives for granted and give nothing

back. So how do we build a different dynamic, in particular around PR? And this is why a Burnham leadership could be so different - if you've got a leader of the Labour Party who's committed to PR that will galvanise that progressive majority vote. In every election since 1979, bar 2015, there's been nominally a progressive majority in this country. Mostly it splits and lets the Tories through. How do you galvanise people around that, not just to beat the right, but to win a mandate for social, economic and democratic change? We don't know the answer yet, but we're working on it and thinking about it.

Sally: If you look at the two recent by-elections - in the Gorton and Denton one, the difference from what you've just been talking about is that the Greens actually could see that they had a chance of winning - mainly because Labour had become so unpopular. People thought there was a real chance for the Greens to win. In a way, you could say that was a politics of hope. I know the anyone-but-Reform thing is always in the background. But who you choose instead of Reform is quite important. The Gorton by-election showed hope in the Greens, but the Makerfield one showed hope for someone who could create a really good alliance around himself.

Neal: The other one to add into the mix is Caerphilly, which was a by-election for the Senedd in October 2025, when Plaid Cymru was seen as the best-placed progressive alternative. That is easier to do in a by-election, where there's a lot of focus and people have got the information to work it out. But it can mean that the progressive vote is squeezed massively. I've never before seen anything like what happened in Makerfield - the Greens, despite having done very well in Gorton and Denton, got virtually no votes, because everyone disciplined themselves to vote for Andy Burnham, and that worked for Andy Burnham in that place, because he had been the successful mayor of Greater Manchester and he personally was incredibly popular. But there aren't 650 Andy Burnhams for the whole country, and he's got to move the dial for the Labour Party if it wants to be progressive enough for Greens and Liberal Democrats to hold their noses to do that in the future.

Sally: Yes, that's why you have to go for PR as well as trying to make the best of the current situation.

Neal: Yes, and Burnham genuinely seems committed to PR, but there isn't going

to be a PR system in place for the next general election. However, we could win a mandate for PR if all of the parties say they support the same system. You've then got a supermajority vote in favour of that, so at least that will be the last first-past-the-post election.

Sally: Would you say that it's necessary to work quite hard to keep it on the agenda?

Neal: Yes - however much Burnham believes in it, he's the only person at the top of the Labour Party who really believes in it, so there'll be these pressures from everyone else, staffers, cabinet, etc, to just drop it. And the complacency thing may also potentially kick in with Burnham. Let's see what happens in the polls. At the moment it's almost as if people see him as having a bit of an electoral cheat code, he's got this electoral gold dust - so we'll carry on doing what we're doing, add a bit of Andy Burnham magic, and everything is going to be okay. But it's not. I knocked on doors in Makerfield, and it is the last-chance saloon for the Labour Party. If there is no plan for the longer term, then for people backing Burnham this one time, it will be the last time. So we've got to work on PR really hard. I think the zeitgeist cultural winds are in our sails on this. Everyone knows that the two-party system is broken, and what happens when the main parties win big majorities but have little real support. A big majority doesn't lead in itself to strong government, if underneath that you've got a fragmented political culture, and people have lent you their vote grudgingly. When you've got no good will, there's no power, there's no force behind what you're doing, and everyone's waiting for you to trip up - on energy, or on welfare reform - because you've not built a consensus for change. So we've got to get across that argument about the fragility and lack of stability under first-past-the-post politics: even if you win a big nominal majority, it doesn't reflect a mandate to change the country. Compass is going to be launching something later in the year called the Council for the Progressive Majority, which will be a space for politicians and activists to work through how progressive parties work together ahead of the election. What do we have in common and how do we express that in the ballot box? But then how do you begin to change Westminster and Whitehall to reflect this multi-party reality, because everything is set up for an adversarial two-party politics. There's a huge amount of work to be done to get this right.

Sally: What do you think about the situations in places like Worcester and

Birmingham, where you've got unusual allies trying to form alliances to run the local authority. In both these cases, Labour have not wanted to cooperate. Local authorities can give you some kind of on-the-ground sense of what coalition government might look like, but people are finding it hard to cooperate, aren't they?

Neal: They are. The Labour Party HQ and machine can veto any local deals and can tell Labour groups not to go into coalition with other people, which is just ridiculous - why have they got that power? What you notice is that the more the system fragments, the more tribal each party seems to become - they're defending their plot and their place. Maybe Labour is the most tribal and the most arrogant, but the Greens and the Liberal Democrats have both disciplined people for working across parties. When it comes to doing the things that the fragmented system demands that we do, our parties are behaving in inverse relationship to the demand for pluralism and cooperation - which is just madness. The voters are far ahead of the political parties in the sense of wanting to vote tactically, wanting to see cooperation. Again, Burnham has the seeds of that cooperative approach that he practised in Greater Manchester (though there's a lot of work to be done). He doesn't see enemies, he sees potential allies. So I think that's a possible area to work on with him.

Sally: Is this the moment to talk about when you got formally investigated by the Labour Party, precisely for advocating this approach?

Neal: Back in 2023, the Labour Party wrote to me to say that I was being investigated for a breach of the rules about advocating for parties other than Labour. It was based on a really spurious claim - there was a tweet by the Liberal Democrat MP Layla Moran, who had reciprocated in her Oxford seat; Greens had stood aside for her, and then the Liberal Democrats stood aside in some council seats for Greens as the payback. And I just said that this is what grown-up politics looks like. And that was enough to trigger the governance unit in in the Labour Party to put me under investigation for quite a long time, about eighteen months. I think they went for me because I was an example to be made, given that I'm relatively prominent. In that period in the Labour Party, many people were fearful of expulsion, and therefore self-policed, and that was exactly what their intention was with me - to get you not to say anything challenging on any front, whether it was cross-party working, Gaza or anything - which is just an awful, desiccated, brittle and destructive politics,

which in the end was always going to snap and break. That whole command and control discipline is an anathema in the twenty-first century. I hope Burnham actively stops that. But my worry is that he won't involve himself very much with Labour Party stuff, and some of the same personnel will keep that going, even if it's under the radar, at a time when there should be a very different, positive, energetic culture. Let's hope not.

Sally: At the end of that process, did they just write to you and say, oh, we've just realised there isn't a case?

Neal: Yes, in the end I got a letter saying, in this instance, there's no case to answer, but behave yourself in the future. But they would have loved to have got me. And there was something in the initial communication that said I must not talk to the press about this, but I thought I'm not allowing them to shoot me quietly in the basement, and I can speak up, I can go to the Guardian and get them to feature it, and whatever else. I did that for myself, but I was also doing it on behalf of everyone who doesn't have the kind of access to the media that people like me enjoy. So I kicked up a huge amount of fuss and made an issue of it. And I think it was a step too far by them, and it's one of the examples of why they're now broken, as the Labour Together, Morgan McSweeney political project has somewhat bitten the dust. But there are still people in the Labour Party who will prosecute that style of politics, given half a chance.

Sally: Just going sideways from that, what do you think about Blue Labour. Because a lot of awful people have come out of Blue Labour, haven't they?

Neal: Well, it's a mix. I don't think the Blue Labour lot were part of that awful hyper-factionalism - McSweeney was a bit of a crossover. And there's a spectrum of blue - my dad was a printer on Fleet Street, and I'm blue-collar Labour. The Labour Party has forgotten class - it's forgotten the working class, it's forgotten communities, and I think it's right that there's a lobby group for that politics.

Sally: But it's always linked with white working class, isn't it?

Neal: I do think that is part of the problem. It's part of a romanticisation of the

past - imagined working-class communities in which neither people of colour or women have much of a role. There are things that have been lost - the solidarity, the collectivism, working-class trade union power - and need to be brought back. But we are in a totally different cultural moment now. So it's a question of how you apply the important bits of that thinking to the world as it is now. And that takes us back to pluralism. How do you meld a social liberal approach with a more traditional working-class politics? It's got to be right that you put those things together. But some people in Blue Labour hate liberals, and are disparaging of progressives.

Sally: And not only that, some of them have driven the terrible anti-migrant rhetoric that, for some reason, Keir Starmer decided to embrace. I think it was Blue Labour people who encouraged him on this, and wrote some of his speeches.

Neal: Yes, there has been that performative cruelty against migrants, and there has been too little to say about the positive role of immigration in in our economy and culture. But, like it or not, the feeling that the government cannot control its borders is an issue. Democracy has to be done within a space, otherwise it's meaningless. How do you control that space, but do it fairly, transparently etc? That's the question.

Sally: … whilst also recognising the plight of refugees, for example.

Neal: Of course, of course. But I think some on the left have been far too much in favour of open borders - let everyone go wherever they want. And that just isn't feasible democratically or economically.

Sally: But we're far from that being the case at the moment, aren't we?

Neal: I agree, but I still think that you have to do something about democratically controlling your borders, but do it in a way that works, and in a way that is fair, kind, generous, etc. I don't think that that debate has played out fully yet. There's more work to be done on that - a position between performative cruelty and open borders has got to be struck.

Sally: There's still quite a lot of space to simply dial down on all the punitive stuff.

But let's move on a bit now. We've talked about PR and pluralism, but, as well as the things we've been talking about, there is the question of authoritarianism, which you have touched on in relation to the way the Starmer leadership dealt with the membership. For me, Starmer's anti-migrant rhetoric is part of his broader resort to an authoritarian framework. As we know from the Thatcherism analysis onwards, law and order has always been a key part of right-wing rhetoric. And there has been a bit of a reliance, in the absence of other things, on going for the law-and-order vote, and going for the anti-migrant vote.

Neal: We originally got that analysis from Stuart Hall and *Policing the Crisis*, and, for example, Andrew Gamble's argument that a free market demands a strong state. When you get all the consequences of neoliberalism, and the people it leaves behind, how do you police them? How do you enforce ownership and wealth issues? How do you keep people on the consumer treadmill? And what do you do as a political leader if you cede any control, any ownership, in the economy to the market - you've got to do something, haven't you? You've got to do something to justify your existence, and the options seem to be either wars abroad or authoritarianism at home. There's a tendency towards a kiss-up, kick-down politics - showing how tough you are by dealing out punishment to the weakest members of society, in whatever shape or form that requires. So, Blair famously said he'd be tough on crime but tough on the causes of crime, but the second bit of that has been left out, and now Labour's just literally tough on crime, in the race to try not to allow Reform to outdo them on any of this stuff. But we know they will always outdo us and we shouldn't be in a race with them on any of those things, whether on crime or wrapping yourself in the flag and being more patriotic than Nigel Farage.

Sally: Yes, politics isn't only about following what you think voters want, it's about making a case. So if someone is trying to change the terms of mainstream debate, to make it acceptable to say all these awful things, your duty as a social-democratic party, or even a centre liberal party, is to counter that rhetoric, not to adopt it.

Neal: Farage didn't join the Conservative Party, or seek to build a better Conservative Party. He created a polarising difference, a very different force, and said exactly what he believed. He wanted Britain out of Europe, and tried out every argument for that, and immigration was the thing that finally landed it for him.

But he absolutely made the weather. I remember watching a recording of Margaret Thatcher, one of those long interviews that politicians used to do with Brian Walden, and he says, well, your policies are going to increase inequality. And instead of dodging it or ducking it, she says, 'yes, Brian, it will do, and that's a good thing because inequality means that people at the top are innovating and being rewarded, and that money trickles down to everyone, and we can tax them'. She embraced her politics. That's what I want to see from left people. That's why people like Mick Lynch are refreshing. Because they don't duck away. They completely own their issue, and speak about it passionately. And that's what we want to see happen, in a popular, accessible way.

Sally: Labour is always going to get far more attacks in the media, where the assumption is always that saying progressive things is a strange form of behaviour. There's a constant attempt to define what's acceptable politics, and the left so often lets itself be trapped in it. How do you push out of that? If you give in to it, you end up saying things you don't believe in, and people quite correctly think you are not saying what you think. But if you say what you think, you're so often presented as outlandish.

Neal: Two things on this. The quick thing is that in every election since 2015, the British public have voted for change. They know that the system's broken, they're looking for ways out of this - Brexit was an example of that. Boris was supposed to fix that. Starmer promised change but hasn't delivered it. People know that things aren't working and they'll go for the party that offers change, whether they do that enthusiastically or not.

But the second, bigger, point is one about the countervailing forces of progressives - let's use that term to encompass everyone from the centre to wherever you want to go on the left - Labour Party, Greens, Plaid, SNP, radical independents, etc. Our problem, as chronicled - let's close the Marxism Today circle - by Eric Hobsbawm in 'The forward march of Labour halted' is that we don't have sufficient forces, a sufficient sense of agency, a vanguard, a vested interest in the country that's going to push for and fight for more.[3] We had that post-45 - look at the way the NHS was finally constructed by Bevan: it didn't become an insurance system because the miners in South Wales wouldn't allow it to be. And they had such industrial and political muscle that they could make what happened be what they wanted to

happen. Well, Labour and the left have lost the working class, the trade unions, they've lost the threat of the Soviet Union. They've lost a system of governance, Fordism, which enabled you to do stuff in machine-like fashion, and in its place you've got globalisation, financialisation, consumerisation, new public management, and marketisation of almost everything. We are weak politically because we are weak in terms of those wider forces. And that limits what we can put on the agenda and how we can shift the Overton window. So, where do we get power from? That's the big question we need to think about - as active citizens, the Progressive Alliance, the mutuals, the social ownership sector, community power, big social movements - we need to think through how we can align with fragments of capital through SMEs, with the more independent farmers, as well as with racialised communities, the disaffected young, the precariat … the art of politics of Compass, Soundings, the remnants of Marxism Today, the Green Party has got to be to construct a political alliance with a political project and political leadership to make us powerful again.

Sally: I agree with you - we used to call it a broad democratic alliance, that used to be the old CP phrase. You have to have a force capable of holding people together. I would add that trade unions remain an important part of any alliance.

Neal: Yes they are, and we're working more closely with them than we have for a while, though their bargaining power is narrower and their numbers are less. But they're clearly there, and like us they need to become more sophisticated in their political operation and see themselves as part of that broad democratic alliance.

Sally: And the other thing I was going say is that many progressive ideas - for example taking utilities back into public ownership - are very widely supported. One thing we've got on our side is that what we're saying is genuinely in people's interests and has broad appeal - whereas it's increasingly evident that the whole body of ideas that animates rent-seeking capital and its allies on the right is untenable, and clearly is not working.

Neal: Yes, and you can also see that influencers like Gary Stevenson on issues like wealth tax are incredibly popular. And we now have a PM who says he wants to 'reverse 40 years of neoliberalism'. Its extraordinary, even Corbyn never said that. But we've got to put those ideas into a political project, both a set of demands and a

political organisation which is right for the twenty-first century. I would suggest that it isn't going to be the Labour Party on its own that does this. The Labour Party isn't going to be some kind of vanguard. We've got to learn - or relearn - the art of broad popular alliances, popular fronts for change: how do you do that in the twenty-first century? That's the essay question for all of us.

Neal Lawson worked for the TGWU, Gordon Brown and as a lobbyist, before becoming the Chair and then executive director of Compass in 2003, having been the main organiser in setting it up. He was for a long time the Managing Editor of *Renewal*, initially the journal of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee. He has been a consistent voice within the Labour Party in arguing for pluralism and the good society, and a consistent advocate of progressive alliances, including during elections.

Compass was set up in 2003 as a membership organisation offering a space for pluralist and democratic-left voices within the Labour Party. In 2011 it opened its membership to all progressives, in recognition of the need for a wider alliance.

Mainstream is a network set up in 2025, initiated by a coalition of leading figures within Labour, including Labour members of Compass and Open Labour, with the aim of shifting the party back towards the centre left. Andy Burnham was a founding member. It sees itself as an organisation for 'radical realists' within the party:

https://renewal.org.uk/journal/
https://www.compassonline.org.uk/
https://www.mainstreamlabour.org/

Notes

1. For more information on Compass and Renewal see note above.

2. Free to view at: https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2003-issue-24/abstract-6959/.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, 'The forward March of Labour Halted', *Marxism Today*, September 1978. Free to view here: https://banmarchive.org.uk/marxism-today/september-1978/the-forward-march-of-labour-halted/.