



For the many not the few: Labour's social democrats and Corbynism

A Policy Network Paper

Steven Fielding
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Policy Network
Second floor
11 Tufton Street
London SW1P 3QB
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0)20 7340 2200
f: +44 (0)20 7340 2211
e: info@policy-network.net

www.policynetwork.org

About the Author

Steven Fielding is professor of political history at the University of Nottingham. He has written extensively on the past and present of the Labour party as well as cultural representations of politics. He has also presented a number of documentaries on Radio 4 and in 2017 curated an exhibition at the People's History Museum to mark the twentieth anniversary of the 1997 election.

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— Steve Fielding

About this paper

Vilified by supporters of Jeremy Corbyn as 'Blairites' or 'centrists', Labour's social democrats need to reaffirm that for which they stand. The main purpose of post-war social democrats was to create a more equal society within capitalism. But as capitalism changed in the 1970s many retreated from prioritizing equality. From being the critical friends of capitalism, many became its emissaries. This attenuated social democracy shaped the New Labour government, which nonetheless addressed inequalities of gender, sexuality and race but whose record on class was modest. Even as the banking crisis and the austerity that followed washed away some of the achievements of the Blair-Brown years, too many social democrats were afraid of being seen as 'anti-business'. Some even referred to themselves as 'progressives' rather than social democrats. The outcome of this caution is the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. If they are to recover their position in the party, social democrats must first rediscover their principled purpose. The tradition of which they are part has made a decisive contribution to the party's past achievements. But if they are to contribute to Labour's future they need to embrace the more robust vision of social democracy outlined by Anthony Crosland over forty years ago.

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The election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader in 2015 has seen Labour's social democrats work through all five stages of grief. From denial, through to anger, bargaining, and depression most have now arrived at acceptance, apart from a few notable eruptions over antisemitism. As Matt Chorley of the Times recently had it, many in Parliament are, "like Rose in Titanic, just bobbing around on an old door on an icy sea, hoping they might be the lucky ones to survive" Corbyn's leadership. For some activists however hope is not enough: they are doing their best to prevent councilors and MPs from being deselected in favour of those swearing complete allegiance to Corbyn. But theirs is an inherently defensive campaign, which employs wily organisational nous more than persuasion to achieve its ends. If such efforts have produced little victories, it still means that, although Labour's showing in the 2018 local elections suggests Corbynism's appeal to voters has peaked, its advance within the party continues almost unabated.

Labour's social democrats are not alone: across Europe their ideological cousins are also in varying states of disarray. Since the 2008 financial crisis those on the centre left who believed capitalism could be used to build a more equal society have been thrown out of office and from the leadership of their parties. To the far left's millenarian assertion that the current economic system has to be cast aside because it has become an implacable engine of ever-increasing inequality they have developed no compelling response.

Yet less than twenty years ago European social democrats were electorally ascendant. Some claimed they had found a new way to reconcile capitalism with the pursuit of a fairer society, one that made all previous strategies redundant. A few spoke of a 'third way' – others of a 'neue mitte' – and asserted theirs was the only means through which a centre-left politics could be built. History, they believed, had spoken.

It is now a decade since the financial crisis destroyed such hubris. But, tainted by their almost unqualified embrace of a radical form of free-market capitalism, social democrats have not found a language or policies to win back their own members, let alone the wider electorate. In few countries has the turn-around been more dramatic than in Britain. For in the 1990s New Labour was seen as supplying the model for a renewed social democracy but now Corbynism is regarded as illustrating the possibility of transcending social democracy from the anti-capitalist left.

Assailed across Twitter and Facebook by a high-profile boy band of bragging Corbynistas, no wonder Labour's parliamentary social democrats are punch drunk. If they are to have any hope of clambering back into the ring they need to reflect on why so many think they are out for the count. They also require an argument to win back Labour members who currently see the semi-mythical figure many simply call 'Jeremy' as a saviour. There are grounds for thinking this is not an impossible task. For even most of those who joined the party after 2015 share the same basic objectives as social democrats, even if they might not realise it. So, rather than burning their bridges by creating a new party, social democrats should find ways of rebuilding them. To find the material for this process of reconciliation social democrats must revisit their past: they need to reassess it and recover some of the more radical strands in a tradition that has contributed so much to the party. But it will not be easy: they have to do this at a time of unprecedented political instability after Britain's vote to leave the European Union. There have been few moments as difficult as this for Labour's social democrats.

A Paradox

While much of their history should inspire them – social democrats can rightly claim credit for most of Labour's achievements in office – looking back also needs to be an occasion for self-criticism: the party's failures in power are also theirs. In particular they need to appreciate how that history has contributed to the creation of Corbynism, for many Labour members embraced Corbyn as a

reaction to social democrats' reluctance to live up to their own defining principles. They are, in other words, largely to blame for their own misfortune.

It might not feel like it just now but however deep is their crisis social democrats can still rebuild a rapport with many of those who currently back Corbyn. Labour's 2017 manifesto was after all entitled, *For the Many Not the Few*, a phrase Corbyn and his acolytes still repeat to encapsulate for what his leadership stands. These words were taken from the party's clause four, that part of its constitution that sets out its basic purpose: it is on all members' party cards. But it is a phrase to which Tony Blair gave his name when revising the clause in 1995 – and in the face of Corbyn's opposition. The relevant part of Blair's clause asserts that Labour:

believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many, not the few, where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe, and where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.

'For the Many Not the Few' is then a 'Blairite' phrase. But it also encapsulates that which the party's social democrats have always believed. That these words are now used against them by those who imagine social democrats to be 'centrists' with little to distinguish them from Conservatives is because they lost their way and failed to fully live up to their promise.

Labour and social democracy

One of the most persistent characteristics of the Labour party is its members' propensity to disagree with one another. The bitterness of today is hardly new.

Created in 1900 to represent the interests of trade unions in parliament, Labour soon became the site of an unrelenting struggle between two basic strategies. On the one hand were those who sought to improve the place of those who worked by hand and brain in the here-and-now. On the other were those who wanted to create a wholly new type of social order. The former believed winning national office through elections was a prerequisite and so engaged with people much as they were, which sometimes meant accommodating deeply conservative attitudes. The latter looked on elections as merely one part of a wider transformative process through which they aimed to reshape people's desires and educate them into becoming citizens capable of building socialism. For the most part advocates of the first strategy, with which social democrats came to identify, albeit with reservations, prevailed. But during the 1930s, 1970s and 1980s exponents of the second approach briefly called the shots, as they do now.

The conflicts to which these differences gave rise were, in the heat of the moment, often regarded as life-or-death. To take one example, in 1960 after losing a conference vote on unilateral nuclear disarmament the party leader Hugh Gaitskell defiantly declared he would "Fight, fight and fight again to save the party we love". Gaitskell regarded opponents as Communists or fools and invariably wanted them expelled. In return some saw him as the embodiment of reactionary evil. In 1961 he succeeded in returning Labour to multilateralism. As a result one anonymous Labour Young Socialist told sociologist Mark Abrams they regarded Gaitskell's sudden death in 1963 as the one thing that made them really happy that year.

Such bitterness has often harmed the party's electoral prospects but more importantly it has obscured that which united most Labour members, many of whom shifted between these two approaches: the primacy of the pursuit of equality. This was something Anthony Crosland, a cabinet

minister during the 1960s and 1970s and the effective theorist of postwar social democracy, called in *The Future of Socialism* (1956) “the strongest ethical inspiration of virtually every socialist doctrine”. The desire for more equality also distinguished party members from Conservatives and Liberals, who had very different concerns. This shared commitment was inevitably itself subject to great debate: members argued over definitions of equality, how it could be achieved, for whom, and when. But it was a defining purpose Labour members too often forgot they shared in common with each other and with no other major political force.

In *The Future of Socialism*, Crosland established the essential social democratic case that greater equality – by which he didn’t just mean equality of opportunity but something that also addressed income disparities – could be achieved within capitalism. Crosland wrote when, thanks to the 1945 Labour government, the nationalised sector accounted for 20 per cent of the economy and much of the rest was subject to other forms of regulation and control. A strong union movement also kept rapacious managers in check. As a result Britain entered a period of unprecedented growth, which created full employment and increasing affluence. In that context Crosland believed the country’s expanding tax base could finance a growing state welfare system, which he saw as the main engine of reducing inequality, for he believed in ‘tax and spend’.

If Crosland looked to a basically capitalist economy to achieve Labour’s ultimate goal, social democracy’s theoretical relationship with capitalism was conditional – equality, not the maintenance of private ownership, being their priority. Seeing it as the best economic system of those available, social democrats became capitalism’s critical friends, for Labour after 1945 had introduced policies initially opposed by capitalists but which ultimately benefitted the economy. Clement Attlee, the quintessential social democrat who led that government, justified nationalisation as a means of making the private sector more efficient. Being a critical friend is never easy, especially for those in a party founded to serve the interests of the trade unions, but if replete with tension, it was role that for a time worked to everybody’s benefit.

From critical friends to emissaries

Capitalism did not however stand still. It fought against the regulations imposed after 1945, which meant social democrats’ balancing act became increasingly precarious. By the 1970s a recession, high inflation, mass unemployment and industrial unrest led some of them to question the viability of Crosland’s model. Many in this generation of social democrats were persuaded that in these extremely difficult circumstances the pursuit of equality should be suspended and resumed only once capitalism was put on a more profitable footing.

That meant less not more of the state; more not less power to the free market. Under the pressure of unprecedented events and the changing tides of economic opinion – which saw Britain called ‘ungovernable’ and the ‘sick man of Europe’ – such a shift was understandable. But it meant, in effect, that social democrats ceased to be capitalism’s critical friends and became its emissaries whose main job it was to break bad news to the labour movement. This was especially true of Crosland’s contemporary, Roy Jenkins – perhaps always more of a liberal than a social democrat – along with other members of what would become the ‘Gang of Four’ who formed the SDP in 1981. Even before Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 victory, Jenkins and colleagues argued the state had become too big and that the market needed to be liberated from the shackles of ‘tax and spend’. They were not alone: it was the Labour government of James Callaghan that started privatising key state assets, not that of Thatcher.

Crosland did not take this route. This is apparent from his essay of the same name in *Socialism Now* (1973), which he produced amidst a dark economic and political context, one in which social

democrats were losing influence in the party to Tony Benn and his far-left allies. Crosland wrote in a Britain of, as he put it, “glaring class inequalities, which an appallingly weak economy makes it hard to tackle”. In fact, he concluded, “the present mood seems to be one, not of hopeful and purposive optimism as it was twenty years ago (when he wrote *The Future of Socialism*), but of pessimism, lack of clarity, a flight into chiasm and a loss of practical radical will-power”. It is a description many in 2018 might recognize.

Despite this grim context, Crosland made the case for the continued pursuit of equality. Instead of retreating from that aim, he claimed social democrats required “a stronger will to change”, a greater faith in their own beliefs, and they needed to adopt “a sharper delineation of fundamental objectives [and] a greater clarity about egalitarian priorities”. Consequently, his priorities for a future Labour government were to: reduce poverty; enable everyone to have a decent home; take development land into public ownership; redistribute capital wealth; eliminate selection in school education; and extend industrial democracy.

Recognising capitalism was in difficulty and unable to produce the kind of growth he considered necessary to sustain the reduction of inequality, Crosland endorsed various forms of interventions, including a state holding company and investment bank. He also recognised that in a time of low growth any government wanting to raise the incomes of the bottom 20 per cent had to increase taxes on the top 80 per cent. Unlike most of his peers, Crosland was willing to take a political risk, arguing Labour should not prevaricate with voters on such a critical issue. He was moreover not just interested in material but also cultural equality – hence his support for comprehensive education – and hoped this would promote a “genuine transfer of power to the community, the consumers and the workers”, with private companies and the state becoming more accountable.

An attenuated social democracy

Death has always played an important role in Labour’s history. Crosland died of a heart attack in 1977 and took his radicalised version of social democracy with him. We cannot say for sure what would have happened had he lived. But we do know that in his absence, Thatcher’s electoral dominance and in particular Labour’s traumatic defeat in 1983 under a far-left manifesto saw the party slowly and reluctantly embrace an attitude to capitalism largely consistent with the attenuated social democracy that had emerged in the 1970s. The people, at least when given a choice at the polls, would apparently accept nothing more. During this period, with capitalism increasingly unshackled by the kind of restraints Labour had imposed after 1945, Thatcher’s logic of ‘No Alternative’ seemed implacable.

By 1994, after four general election defeats in a row, during which time class inequality had massively increased, Labour members were prepared to embrace any leadership candidate promising to end the party’s years in the wilderness. Over 58 per cent of them backed Tony Blair who argued that the price of electoral victory was the transformation of Labour into New Labour. But although Blair sounded like a revolutionary, New Labour was merely the end of a journey begun by Jenkins and others. Indeed, figures who worked for the Callaghan government (and later joined the SDP) exerted some significant influence over the new leader, including Jenkins himself.

Blair believed that if Labour was to achieve anything it had to work with what seemed to be a permanently hegemonic globalised free market: it could not afford to challenge capitalism. He nonetheless recognised that the market alone could not make the economy fully efficient or society fairer. In Blair’s imagination, government’s role was highly prescribed and accepted a market pre-eminence that had begun to stretch from the economy into society, the workings of government and the public sphere more generally. Even so, despite what his critics said, Blair was a social

democrat but one shaped by three decades of failure and a particular interpretation of that failure. Even so, within severe limits he still pursued the classic social democratic strategy, that of trying to achieve a more equal society through capitalism. But it was a form capitalism very different to the one of which Crosland had spoken in the 1950s, one much more resistant to the pursuit of equality.

Having won his 1997 election by a landslide, Blair's first term saw spending limits loosened, and taxes other than for income surreptitiously raised. He pledged to abolish child poverty and started to reduce it, while tax credits for those in work promised to improve the incomes of the poorest, as did measures such as introducing the minimum wage and raising pensions. By the time Labour went back to the country for the 2001 general election Blair, together with Gordon Brown, had developed his government's 'invest and reform' agenda for public services, which dramatically improved health and education provision. Moving away from the Thatcherite obsession with tax-cuts, Labour had nudged politics onto more social democratic ground. As a result, relative poverty declined during the New Labour years even if inequality on some measures – thanks to the dramatic rise in the incomes of the top 1 per cent – did not. But progress was limited and patchy, and Blair was too afraid of reviving the Thatcherite neoliberal beast to talk up those social democratic achievements his government did have to its credit.

All through this period Jeremy Corbyn spent much time voting against his own government – often with the Conservative opposition. But not everybody uneasy with Blair's cautious approach could be described as part of the hard left. Some of those closest to Blair were also frustrated. Peter Hyman worked for the Labour leader as a speechwriter and strategist but in 2003 left Number 10 to become a teacher. Writing in his remarkable account, *One Out Of Ten* (2005), Hyman argued that having won two landslide victories Labour no longer needed to:

"reassure people we can be trusted with government. We have proved that. I believe passionately that you cannot create a modern social democratic country by stealth. You have to argue for higher taxes to pay for education and health, argue for greater tolerance for minorities, argue for greater opportunity for those denied it. We have to build a grassroots movement that will sustain New Labour in the long term. We have to use our powers of persuasion."

Echoing the words of Crosland three decades before, Hyman argued for a more confident and assertive social democracy. By then however it was already too late: Blair had taken Britain into the Iraq War, his party was increasingly divided over that and other issues while the banking crisis was just over the horizon. Instead of attempting this maneuver from a position of strength it was only tried when Labour was discredited and back in opposition.

Ed Miliband was elected leader in 2010 hoping to reset the party's compass away from New Labour caution: he saw the banking crisis as evidence that the Blair-Brown governments had insufficiently challenged capitalism in the interests of the many. He was however weighed down by the party's record in office, one many voters were convinced was responsible for the financial crash. Leading shadow cabinet colleagues also opposed his embrace of a more radical form of social democracy. And Miliband played a tricky hand badly: for him, perhaps, the party leadership came too soon.

In a speech to Labour's 2011 conference Miliband outlined his new direction. Claiming that 'all parties must be pro-business today', he nonetheless spoke as a critical friend to capitalism by distinguishing between business leaders who ran their employees into the ground while making millions for themselves and others who created wealth and jobs. Miliband said he wanted to support entrepreneurs he termed the 'producers' who 'train, invest, invent, sell', rather than the 'predators' who are only interested in 'taking what they can'. He sought to make capitalism work in a more equitable way through helping small businesses more easily access credit and giving government contracts only to firms with adequate apprenticeship schemes.

This was a modest set of interventionist measures. Even so the rightwing media used Miliband's speech to cast him as a Marxist. Indeed, so warped was British politics and the media which reported on it by this point that from the outset of his leadership 'Red Ed' was widely presented as a dangerous radical. It was also striking how many of Miliband's parliamentary colleagues echoed this perspective. So enmeshed in attenuated social democracy and their role as capitalism's emissaries were all but one of the candidates who sought to replace him as leader in 2015 they queued up to describe Miliband's condemnation of the worst excesses of capitalism as 'anti-business'. This was perhaps the very nadir of post-war social democracy.

The reality of Corbynism

The one candidate not to indulge in these attacks was Jeremy Corbyn. Instead, he criticised Miliband for being complicit with the Conservatives over the need for the austerity that had followed the banking crisis. Corbyn argued Labour required a complete break with 'neoliberalism' – a blanket term the hard left now used to describe capitalism as whole. He spoke not as a critical friend but as a long-standing and implacable enemy of the capitalist system: he was most definitely, unapologetically 'anti-business'. Had there been a social democrat able to free themselves from the chains of caution that had weighed down their tradition since the 1970s to reflect creatively on Miliband's project, it is possible Corbyn might not have appealed so much to Labour's members. The future leader was extremely fortunate in his opponents.

Corbyn not only won the Labour leadership in 2015 but fought off attempts to unseat him a year later and led an election campaign in 2017 that saw the Conservatives lose their House of Commons majority. Party membership also rose from under 200,000 immediately before the 2015 election to over half a million in the aftermath of the 2017 contest. Many joined to support Corbyn's leadership campaign and defend his position as leader, with 61.8 per cent of members reelecting him in the vote against Owen Smith in 2016.

What does Corbyn's success mean for social democrats? Initially some believed it represented the death of their party, thinking it had been taken over by hard-left entryists, Stop the War activists and others from outside the Labour tradition. Despite the disastrous example of the SDP, there was talk of breaking away to create a 'centrist' party. Some parliamentarians even resigned as MPs to pursue more lucrative careers outside politics. But for social democrats willing to revisit the past, and look more closely at the present, the reality is less alarming than it first appeared.

The environment in which social democrats need to work has undoubtedly changed. Thanks to constitutional reforms under Miliband, 2015 was the first leadership election decided on a purely 'one-member-one-vote' basis. Until the creation of an electoral college in 1981, only MPs voted for the leader. Under this system, MPs retained a third of the total votes which decided the matter. But Miliband's reforms in 2014 gave all members an equal say. This new power was the main cause of the surge in membership as thousands joined the party to vote for Corbyn.

Surveys conducted by the ESRC Party Members Project as well as YouGov suggest however that this influx has not significantly transformed the character of the membership. Those who joined after the 2015 election are as white, middle-class and middle-aged as more long-standing members. Nor are they much more left wing than the rest, although intriguingly, they imagine themselves to be more radical. This means there is a broad consensus in favour of redistribution and a belief that the majority does not get their fair share from the nation's wealth. But when did most Labour members not think such things? Members are also socially liberal: they see immigration as beneficial and nearly 80 per cent want a second Brexit referendum. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant

proportion who joined after 2015 are actually former members who left the party during the Blair years or earlier, unhappy with the direction New Labour was taking. These are, as one with close experience of local Labour politics has it, 'decent people trying to make a difference'. A few, without doubt, are hardline Trotskyists or 'Trumps of the left' but while they may speak the loudest, they are not representative of the vast majority of Labour's newer members.

It can't be denied however that the voice of the hard left in the party is now stronger than at any point since the 1980s. This is largely thanks to the organisational and social media skills of Momentum, the group set up to advance Corbyn's cause within the party. Yet, while claiming 200,000 'supporters' which it can effectively mobilize for one-member-one-vote ballots through social media, Momentum's actual membership is still only about 40,000. Observation at party gatherings suggests many are just like other Labour members – they have joined Momentum simply because of its declared support for Corbyn – but there is no doubt Momentum has opened up Labour to some of the far-left's most extreme sectarians, who as recently as 2015 were amongst the party's bitterest enemies.

The organisation certainly punches above its weight, as recent NEC elections saw three Momentum-backed candidates top the poll. This was an impressive achievement, but none received more than 68,000 votes in an electorate of over half a million. Although still not great news for their opponents, this performance hardly suggests huge levels of enthusiasm for the group at the grass roots. And while Momentum has areas of strength in Liverpool, Brighton and parts of London – as well as a few other traditional stomping grounds of the hard left – its record in selection contests for councils and parliament confirm its influence is inconsistent. When opposed by the right kind of people and arguments in the appropriate circumstances, Momentum loses. But the longer Corbyn is leader the more it will likely grow in numbers and exert power and in ever more forceful terms.

'Jeremy'

This is a landscape in which social democrats can still thrive. Those whose primary political belief is in making society more equal should be able to work together. There is a lot of common ground. But in establishing that territory, social democrats face a major obstacle: members' faith in the semi-mythical figure of 'Jeremy'.

Labour members have invariably reacted against the disappointments of power by shifting to the left. The Socialist League in the 1930s, the phenomena of Bevanism in the 1950s and of Bennism in the 1970s and 1980s were all motivated by the same belief that in government the party's leaders had betrayed the cause. It has proved to be a captivating if simplistic explanation. One shining virtue possessed by Corbyn is that he was not tainted by office during the Blair-Brown years, a period many now regard, through the prism of the Iraq war, in the darkest possible terms. Largely thanks to Blair's own caution, few members were aware of the positive achievements of his government. They turned to Corbyn as the anti-Blair, believing he would return the party to its lost principles and disavow compromises which since 2010 had in any case only delivered Conservative governments. As one member declared in 2015: Corbyn might only deliver another defeat but at least it would be based on policies they fully supported. Since then, the 2017 election has raised hopes he might even lead Labour to victory.

But the 'Jeremy' to whom such members often refer is a constructed persona, one that combines Corbyn's real attributes with those his supporters project onto him. This peculiar creation has cast an impressively powerful cloak of invisibility over less savoury aspects of his past, as well as the operating methods of those with whom he surrounds himself. It has even allowed Corbyn to support a Brexit that the vast majority of members oppose, while escaping their criticism. How long this device will work its magic, only time will tell.

Social democrats were not beguiled, much good that did them. They saw instead a figure from the margins of the party who consorted with many of its enemies. Confident that he carried more baggage than the Orient Express they were thrown off balance by the idealisation of Jeremy Corbyn. However, instead of trying to understand their responsibility in the creation the Corbyn phenomenon, many preferred to ridicule those who flocked to his rallies as celebrants in a bizarre personality cult. Perhaps some were: but it was not true of everybody.

What is to be done?

At least until the next general election, which has to be held by 2022 but might well be called soon after Brexit in the spring of 2019, Corbyn has what amounts to a free hand in the party. Despite Theresa May leading one of the most divided governments in recent history, Labour remains, at best, only level pegging in the polls with the Conservatives. The party's disappointing performance in the 2018 local elections, despite May's troubles over the Windrush scandal, only confirms the impression that a Labour defeat in a future general election remains a distinct possibility. Such an outcome will probably lead to Corbyn's resignation, the promise of 2017 having been unfulfilled. Even if he clung on, members would likely start to question his ability to ever win power. We should recall that in March 2017, when Labour trailed badly in the polls, half in the party wanted Corbyn to stand down before the next election. Few anticipated May would call one so soon or that Labour would do so well. At some point members, and trade union leaders, become weary of the impotence of opposition: this was why Benn's support drained away during the 1980s.

But in a two-party system, especially given the uncertainty of Brexit negotiations, Corbyn might well find himself Prime Minister, albeit probably with a small or non-existent majority. Quite how he would handle that role – and how cohesive his government would be – nobody can foresee. Some think of the current Labour leader as a latter-day Attlee. Others may see closer comparisons with French socialist Leon Blum whose short-lived 1936 Popular Front government collapsed in humiliation. Would Corbyn, for example, be able to reconcile the hopes of Momentum activists who seek 'A World Transformed' with dealing with the hard-faced men and women of the City of London?

Nobody can predict the future, but Corbyn will not be around forever. Rumours suggest he does not want to be leader for a prolonged period so, whenever he departs the stage, where will Labour's social democrats stand? Can they produce a candidate for leader able to appeal to members, many of whom currently think of them as 'centrists' who, all things considered, really should join the Tories?

Social democrats should prepare for this moment by lifting their sights to the horizon: it is a luxury their marginal position in the party presently allows them. To advance into the future they need to rediscover and publically assert the unique value of the Labour tradition of which they are part. Indeed they should angrily reject the terms 'centrist' or 'moderate' when applied to them. For to be a social democrat is to be part of a tradition that helped challenge received opinion about the economy and was at the forefront of the struggle to increase equality. That is why they should, amongst other things, revisit social democracy's ambitious Croslandite iteration. Social democrats should describe themselves as such and explain what that means: too few even use the term, Chuka Umunna being one of the rare exceptions. They certainly should stop referring to themselves as 'progressives', a term some adopted during the Blair years, for while it sounds positive, few know what it means.

But if they do revisit Crosland, he cannot supply a panacea. Contemporary social democrats still have to think for themselves in the unique context in which they hope to prosper. Crosland's assumptions were formed in a different era, one defined by the cold war. As a benevolent elitist, he believed

the 'Man in Whitehall' knew best, wanting to do good for people but not imagining they should participate in the process themselves. Also, when he talked of equality he was largely ignorant of the need to tackle disparities of gender, race, disability and sexuality. But Crosland at least held true to the principle of making Britain a more equal society within capitalism – and when the economic system failed to help in that pursuit he was not afraid to act as its critical friend and propose its reform. He was not concerned about being called 'anti-business' when capitalism stopped serving the interests of the many rather than the few.

Social democrats need to define themselves in public and principled terms to reestablish their values in the minds of some in their party who have forgotten – or never known – that they stand for more than pragmatism. But they also have to exist in the here-and-now. This means they have little alternative but to support the leader for whom most Labour members voted. But what form should that support take?

It is certainly counter-productive to take on Corbyn directly. Those MPs who take to the airwaves to attack the leader on an almost habitual basis now look like modern-day Cassandras, making doom-laden prophecies nobody believes. They must respect the reasons why so many members elected Jeremy, even if they find it hard to respect the man himself. The support they offer Corbyn should not however be uncritical. But in censuring they should do so from the basic principle of equality – of gender, race, disability, sexuality but above all of class. They should support Corbyn's policies insofar as they serve that principle but critique them when they do not.

Given the relative success of Labour's campaign, the 2017 manifesto has been praised to the skies by Corbyn's supporters and will likely be the template for the party's next. However, in reality the document was a rummage bag of enticing commitments designed to mitigate what even those who drafted it assumed would be a terrible defeat. Social democrats building their arguments around the principle of equality could get on board with many of the pledges, but there is also much room for improvement. Objective observers like the Institute for Fiscal Studies for example calculated that in 2017 it was the Liberal Democrats whose policies most benefitted the poorest because Corbyn did not plan to reverse most Conservative cuts to working-age benefits.

In particular, social democrats could interrogate the policy many Corbynites see as the jewel in the manifesto crown: the commitment to abolish university tuition fees. This certainly encouraged a significant rise in the party's share of young voters and it also appealed to aspirational parents hoping their children would attend university. But while electorally effective, few outside Corbyn's circle think abolishing tuition fees is an efficient way of making Britain more equal. There are many other ways that could be achieved. We know that the current shadow education secretary Angela Rayner – by no means everybody's idea of a social democrat – opposed the policy on that basis. The measure disproportionately benefits students from middle class homes: it would distribute income from poorer taxpayers to their better off peers. The policy even fails in its stated purpose to open up university education to young people from less affluent backgrounds. Scotland has free university tuition but while there has been a rise in the number of working-class students in England and Wales since the introduction of the £9,000 fee this has not happened north of the border. An imperfect mechanism in need of radical reform it certainly is but completely abolishing tuition fees would cost government about £11 billion a year. It seems strange a Labour leader seriously committed to equality would have this policy as their centrepiece. Such a leader would be better advised to spend that sum on preschoolers, given experts agree that investing in the youngest children has the most impact on social equality – an insight that inspired New Labour's Sure Start scheme.

Social democrats should also advance measures designed to advance equality, as Rachel Reeves and Stella Creasy have done recently, respectively advocating increased wealth taxes and imposing

a windfall tax on PFI companies. It is also entirely legitimate to debate how such policies should be prioritised in what is likely to be a flat-lining economy for some time, as the UK comes to terms with the consequences of leaving the EU. What, social democrats can legitimately ask, should be a priority for a Labour party with the renewed focus on equality that members voted for in September 2015? Beyond tuition fees, there are many other issues that can be interrogated from the perspective of equality. Social democrats should critique party policy from this standpoint to build bridges with those like Angela Rayner who are committed to advancing social justice according to what works.

Alongside this ideological reframing, social democrats must continue to engage in the politics of organisation. Right now, the grassroots work of Labour First and Progress, as well as social democrats belonging to neither, is vital to defend otherwise competent councillors and MPs threatened with deselection, just because Momentum does not care for them. But for sustained success and to have a chance of appealing to those across the party, the ideological framework must be in place. For what purpose should such elected representatives be defended? Finding the person or group of persons to best articulate that vision at a national level is another crucial matter. As the example of Corbyn confirms, the right persona can take a seemingly defeated cause to victory.

Social democrats have made a positive contribution to Labour's past: without them at the helm the party would have achieved much less. Until they regain their voice Labour will likely remain a vehicle for the expression of its members' legitimate concerns, but one unable to form a government with the power to address them. Corbyn's leadership is a product of social democrats' failure to live up to their own principles. It is now time they recovered their lost selves and proclaim as loudly and as frequently as possible – in glorious technicolor – their continued and revitalised commitment to advancing the interests of the many not the few – not only in principle, but in practice.