



AFTER THE CRASH

Reinventing the left in Britain

edited by **Richard S. Grayson** and **Jonathan Rutherford**

After the Crash – re-inventing the left in Britain

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We believe that now is the time for a new coalition of ideas and action on the centre left, working together to find common ground for change. At the heart of such a coalition is the belief that social democrats, liberals, greens and civic nationalists share a wide range of concerns. We all want to build a society in which individuals have more life chances, and we all fear for the future of the planet. We all believe that a more equal society is absolutely essential to secure these aims, and we all believe that greater democracy is crucial in giving people power, voice and the ability to secure more freedom and a sustainability economy.

Although Labour remains a central part of the progressive future, there are also tens of thousands of members of the Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, along with progressive people in no party, who are prepared to discuss this kind of coalition politics. *After the Crash* is intended to help begin a conversation between these constituencies, so that we can find better solutions to the problems we face than are currently on offer from the mainstream of the major political parties.

After the Crash – re-inventing the left in Britain is edited by
Richard S. Grayson and Jonathan Rutherford

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Common ground

Richard S. Grayson and Jonathan Rutherford

The election approaches and Britain begins the long haul out of deep recession. We have been sleepwalking into disaster and the financial crash has jolted us awake. The country is no longer what many imagined it to be. There is increasingly entrenched wealth for the few, verging on the dynastic in some cases, alongside some of the highest levels of poverty and inequality in Europe. There is more home ownership, but no investment in housing for the next generation, and now millions are in urgent need of a decent home. Our economy grew on asset bubbles and speculation that lined the pockets of the rich. We live in a consumer wonderland, but low pay and stagnant wages have led to unprecedented amounts of borrowing and personal debt. And amidst the gilded baubles of this false prosperity is a winner-takes-all society, at risk from increasing levels of loneliness and mental illness.

Since 1979 and the electoral victory of Margaret Thatcher, the political and business elites, and their allies in the media, have embraced free market capitalism as a blind faith. ‘There is no alternative’, they protested, and silenced all opposition. Progress was defined in terms of economic efficiency rather than human well-being. Now the crisis has left the elites trapped in the discredited neoliberal orthodoxy of the past. Our democracy and liberties have been diminished and public trust in government undermined. The 2009 Ipsos MORI Annual Survey of Public Trust in Professions reveals the depth of this crisis. Only 13 per cent trust politicians, down from 21 per cent in 2008, and only 16 per cent trust government, down from 24 per cent.¹ Before us lies the challenge of a dysfunctional economy, the costs and demands of an ageing population, the failure of Copenhagen and the threats of

global warming, resource depletion and the end of oil. There are no individual market solutions to these problems.

In such a crisis, one would expect an alternative to neoliberalism to be riding high in the polls. Instead, the party which is ahead, the Conservative Party, offers no alternative and – perhaps for this reason – does not command widespread confidence. It has failed to inspire the real (if partly misguided) enthusiasm that existed for New Labour in 1997. David Cameron may have shaped the Conservative revival around the need to renew society, but he does not challenge the fundamental problems of the economy. Indeed, he believes that the neoliberal orthodoxy he helped to create in his younger days has solved the problems of the British economy. In his contribution to this ebook, Alan Finlayson describes how Oliver Letwin, Chairman of the Conservative Party’s policy review saw the task of Conservative renewal: ‘the social revolution we now need to achieve is as great as the economic revolution that was required in the 1980s and 1990s’. But the Conservative economic revolution not only devastated whole regions of the country, it has ended in calamity. The Conservatives do not have a political economy capable of addressing our economic problems. Their indecision and uncertainty in the face of financial crisis has revealed that behind the rhetoric of compassionate conservatism the Tory party cannot give up its historic role as the defender of the property rights of the privileged. Its goal is a return to business as usual.

The Labour leadership differs only in degree. It too shares the same desire to minimise change. The bank bail-out was necessary, but it socialised the risk and the debt while leaving profit and control in the hands of the banking oligarchy. Did the government nationalise the banks, or did the bankers privatise the government? This ambiguity goes to the heart of power in Britain, and highlights the timidity of New Labour in taking on powerful interests. The status quo it supported has gone, and there is no turning back to the casino capitalism and globally unbalanced economic growth it

presided over. But Labour has yet to grasp the scale of the changes that are necessary.

Since 1945 Labour has been the principle electoral vehicle for Britain's progressive aspirations, but it has reached a watershed. Its three election victories from 1997 were historically unprecedented, and yet it is now in serious difficulties. Its electoral successes were tempered by compromises and limitations as it adapted itself to the prevailing orthodoxies. It has deepened and extended privatisation and marketisation in the NHS and across the public sector. It made a Faustian pact with a financial oligarchy that helped its accrual of a dangerous amount of power and become a law unto itself. It took the country into a deeply unpopular and divisive war that has left countless dead. Its membership has been decimated and its organisation hollowed out. Many local branches exist in name only and there is a lack of democracy and accountability within its ruling structures. By the 2005 election it had lost four million voters. Whatever the outcome of the approaching general election, a radical political and philosophical reassessment of the party and its historic purpose is necessary.

Moments of social and economic change like this one, writes Jon Cruddas, produce major political re-alignments. The political fault-lines of a new era are beginning to take shape. On one side are those who continue to believe that the market and individual choice are the most effective means of governing people and maximising individual freedom. On the other side are those who believe that individual freedom must be rooted in greater equality, social relationships and the democracy of public action. This fault-line cuts across party lines and divides them from within: Thatcherite politics versus compassionate Conservatism; market Liberal Democrats versus social Liberal Democrats; neoliberal New Labour versus social democratic Labour.

Labour is central to the progressive future and it needs to begin a process of democratic renewal both within its own organisation and by involving a broad range of progressive social and political

movements in rebuilding a centre-left coalition. This will mean new kinds of transformative political alliances. As Jon Cruddas goes on to argue, alliances of this kind are not at odds with Labour's traditions: 'At its best, Labour has been at the heart of broader social and cultural movements in a mutual exchange of ideas and practices.'

There are tens of thousands of members of the Labour Party, Green Party, Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the SNP, along with progressive people in no party, who are prepared to discuss this kind of coalition politics. Social democrats, social liberals, greens and civic nationalists have some fundamental political aims in common. We all want to build a society in which individuals have more life chances, and we all fear for the future of the planet. We all believe that a more equal society is absolutely essential to secure these aims, and we all believe that greater democracy is crucial in giving people power, voice and the ability to secure more freedom and a sustainability economy.

After the Crash is intended to help begin a conversation between these constituencies. Richard Grayson points to the centrality of the issue of equality to all our politics, and to the revival of the centre left: 'Unequal life chances offend the sense of common humanity shared by social democrats and social liberals. They have an impact on the whole of society. Moreover, they are closely identified with tensions between the global north and south, whether manifested in the disagreements over how to combat climate change or at the extremism in the alienation of parts of the Islamic world.' The contributors to this ebook represent different traditions – associated with ecological politics, individual liberty and equality. Not all of them will agree with everything in the book, as the editors do not. Yet we and they share the common ground of equality. Caroline Lucas, Leader of the Green Party, writes: 'The sustainability agenda and the equalities agenda are one and the same'. Steve Webb, Liberal Democrat Shadow Secretary for Work and Pensions, believes that, 'if society is unequal, the individual is not free'. Jon

Cruddas argues against sectarian politics: ‘It is wrong to think of socialism as a tradition that stands in opposition to liberalism.’

The debates that have already taken place between and within, for example, Compass and the Social Liberal Forum have shown that the divides within parties are often as big as those between them. Political parties are always coalitions, with people joining at different times and for different reasons. Consequently, those with whom we have most in common are sometimes in parties other than our own, or have not been able to commit to a party.

The contributors to this ebook represent political and social ideas that, taken together, form the historical majority opinion in Britain. But the electoral system divides this opinion and encourages a focus on the concerns of ‘swing’ voters in middle-class southern English constituencies. Such an approach encourages a coalescence around what Neal Lawson calls an ‘essentially pro-growth, pro-market, pro-City agenda’. And Jonathon Porritt reinforces his point, by arguing that the political imperatives of this agenda are, ‘growth good: more growth necessarily better; profits good: profit maximisation better; trade good: unfettered global trade better; taxation bad: high taxes terrible – and so on.’

The future of progressive politics in Britain is too important to leave to political parties alone. They are necessary but they are not sufficient. Whatever the result of the next general election, we need to create a common ground for a progressive coalition of ideas and action. Without this coalition the political agenda will remain unchallenged. ‘Then’, says Porritt, ‘we’re basically stuck with an eco-cidal business-as-usual model of progress’. Without this coalition, there will be no deep-rooted hinterland of support to sustain a future progressive government. It will be quickly blown off course by events. It will buckle beneath the sustained attack of the right-wing media, or it will be sabotaged by a conspiracy in the money markets. In the decade ahead we will need a progressive government that is much more resilient than New Labour in identifying its enemies and standing up to them. Real change will

require a strong government, and a stronger democracy that has widespread active support. This can only happen if we build alliances and develop a broad progressive consensus of opinion. The potential strength of such a broad progressive coalition lies in our political diversity and in our willingness to engage in dialogue, recognise our differences, and build enduring and trusting relationships. The common ground we are looking for is not lying out there waiting to be discovered without effort; we will need to make it ourselves. We will need to face up to our differences of interest. The nationalist parties directly challenge the unionist politics of the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party. And they represent a direct electoral challenge in Wales and Scotland. Richard Thomson argues that the nationalists are the better internationalists: ‘With British stock in the world at a particularly low moral ebb in the aftermath of Iraq, might it not be better to allow the new Holyrood parliament to assume full responsibility for international engagement, building instead on the more positive associations people have as regards Scotland?’ Alongside such challenges for the centre left there is much to learn from the plural politics developing in the devolved countries. Richard raises the question of fascism and the development of an ethnic-based, nationalist politics of Englishness: ‘Given the growing political significance of “Englishness”, it is imperative that the English left engages with the debate, to avoid English identity becoming synonymous with ethnicity, rather than civic values of tolerance and inclusivity.’ Central to a new progressive movement must be the search for a new settlement of nations in Britain.

What will come next? The first task of a new politics is to understand the conjuncture – the complexly interconnected whole – that we find ourselves in. Stuart Hall in his conversation with Doreen Massey offers us a method:

As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is

usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, ‘fuse in a ruptural unity’. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing (Thatcher to Major?), or to a somewhat transformed version (Thatcher to Blair); or relations can be radically transformed. The question is, can we look at the present situation in that way?

Stuart Hall offers a method of thinking structurally and historically about how the individual, culture, society, economy and the relations of these categories to each other are politically articulated together into a hegemonic power.

Not every political force or philosophy which is dominant at a particular period achieves widespread consent. It is not always the case that the governing political philosophy is spoken by everybody as if they’re already inside it. It is when it becomes ‘just how things are’ that it wins consent and enters common sense. And at that point the political regime or philosophy has achieved a more settled, long-term, deeper form of control.

The problem for Labour and the broader liberal left is that it has not been able to effectively challenge neoliberalism. That is not least because Labour has played an important role in developing its hegemony. However, the financial crash creates the conditions in which a real challenge is possible. So far it has only highlighted our political weakness. The left has been no threat to the power of financial capitalism, which was the architect of its own downfall. It lacks the wherewithal to become an agency of progressive change ready with a political alternative. The neoliberal model of capitalism might have lost its credibility, but it remains the only story of economic life on offer. Its failings have been exposed, but its hegemony has not been defeated. Its language of customer, contract,

cost, choice and utility pervades our culture. It has transformed British society and entrenched itself as the common sense of the age.

We need to rediscover our capacity for collective change. Our task is to reverse the decades-long transfer of wealth and power from the great majority of people to the financial sector, global corporations and a tiny rich elite. This means defeating neoliberalism, not just politically, but in the spheres of intellectual life, culture, society and economy. But Labour has lost the ability to engage in this kind of politics. It no longer has a covenant with the people and it does not yet know how to remake it. The future of the centre-left requires building new alliances across society and across political parties. The goals are to expand and deepen democracy in politics, society and the economy, and create a more equal and reciprocal society in which freedom and security support each other.

We can begin by engaging people in a national debate about the big questions of how we live as well as how we create wealth. In what kind of society do we want to live? What kind of economy will sustain it and not destroy the earth through ever increasing levels of growth? We may come up with a variety of answers, but a debate about our ethical relationship to each other and to society will help reshape the political life of this country. In the process we need to revisit our own traditions. Stuart White provides us with a map of the philosophical traditions of the left and liberalism to help guide us. He identifies five: ethical socialism, socialist feminism, social liberalism, democratic republicanism, and marxism. Though green thinking, as a newer tradition, does not feature explicitly on his list, Stuart argues that 'the next left, pluralist as it might be, will surely be a thoroughly green left.' To include ecological sustainability will require a re-imagining of the relationship between natural life, economic activity and society.

Our philosophies are the animating force of our politics and policy proposals. The question of which principles we hold passionately are not the same as the strategic questions of how we

build popular support and win elections. Nor should we let them stand in the way of making alliances. As the late Jerry Cohen argued, we need a strong set of beliefs to help us win back what's been lost, and to move forward, step by step, towards the kind of society we want to live in. We need a political pragmatism, not of the 'what works' variety, but one based around the question of what justice fundamentally requires.

A set of values and philosophies can mobilise a movement. They will contribute to new cultures and ways of living, but they are not sufficient to realise a new society. Ideas must become action. We need to argue for an ethical economy that is people-centred, not consumer-centred. Nowhere is the intellectual failing of the centre left more acute than in the realm of political economy. The financial crisis and the discrediting of neoclassical economics have left an intellectual void in policy-making. We need a new political economy that can take the country through the transition from casino capitalism to ecologically sustainable, equitable and balanced forms of development, wealth creation and employment. Britain has to make the transition from casino capitalism to a low-carbon, more equitable and balanced form of economic development. The transition demands an economics whose principles are ecologically sustainable wealth creation, durability, recycling, cultural inventiveness, equality and human flourishing.

The fundamental logic of this new economy must be ecological sustainability. As Jonathan Porritt points out: 'we're going to have to fundamentally rethink the conventional growth model on which the global economy is currently based'. A new model of an ethical economy is the main theme of Leanne Wood's chapter. We will need to debate an economic programme that will tackle the structural inequalities of class and wealth, and which can regulate the destructive impact of under-regulated markets and capital accumulation. Climate change, peak oil, the need for energy and food security are all core green issues that will lie at its heart.

The means we use to achieve our ends will help to define our

politics. The processes by which we negotiate our alliances with one another will define the democracy of our movement, our acceptance of pluralism and our recognition of difference. It will be our commitment to a plural and democratic politics that will make us truly radical. Despite the disillusionment with political parties, our society has an extraordinary variety of social, community and cultural activism. Politics has become more individualised, ethical, and rooted in a diversity of beliefs, lifestyles and localities. This is stimulating a search for new kinds of democratic political structures and cultures that will re-connect institutions of political power with social movements and political constituencies. Labour could be at the forefront of this cultural change in politics, both in its own organisational life, in its campaigning style, and in its relationships with others. But it can only take that role if it learns not only to lead, but also to negotiate and share in pursuit of the common good. It must learn to be one of the larger tents on the campsite rather than seeking to be the 'big tent' that encompasses all.

There is no doubt that people are ready for a new politics which expresses their values and their profound discontent with the current hegemonic economic system. As Neal Lawson writes: 'We die wishing not that we had owned more stuff but that we had had more time with the people we love. The crash is a wake-up call; our lives are out of our control.' That is a view with which the vast majority of the population could be brought to identify because it taps into concerns they already have. It can be part of a new set of values and ethics on the left which draws people to them. But that can only happen if the left finds forms of communication and organisation that enable people to re-engage once more in insurgent political struggle.

We believe that the best hope for Britain in the coming decade is a new politics of the common good, which draws on some coherent and deeply-rooted strands of British political thought. One is the kind of social democracy that is influenced by ethical socialism and which grows upward from the people. Another is the social

liberalism of thinkers such as L.T. Hobhouse. These older traditions are now entering into dialogue with newer movements, including the greens and those campaigning for a better understanding of living with difference. Together these traditions can offer a politics of the common good, an affirmation of the ordinary everyday life of our work, our family, love and friendships. In this affirmation we can begin re-building the idea of advancing individual freedom through democratic social action – an individualism that is not at odds with society but depends upon it.

Notes

1. See Ipsos MORI, 'Trust in Professions', www.ipsosmori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=15&view=wide.

Our Labour

Jon Cruddas

We need to renew our own traditions, but also to engage in dialogue with other progressives

As we approach the election, we are at a watershed in the life of our party. Never before have we achieved the kind of electoral successes of the last decade, yet we may be close to ruin. We have lost many millions of voters since 1997. We have lost hundreds of thousands of members. We have become reviled by younger generations who view us as the party of the establishment, of war, of insecurity. New Labour treated people as individualistic and ruthlessly self-interested. It acted as if the electorate – or at least the section of it that counted – bordered on the misanthropic, and would only respond to a sour, illiberal politics about consuming more. It kept up a deadening silence around deeper ideas of fraternity, of collective experience, and what it is we aspire to be as a nation. To put this simply, it assumed the worst of the British people. And at the end of that road lay an empty vision of centre-left politics.

New Labour talked quite rightly about the need for the party to broaden its appeal to win the support of ‘aspirational’ voters, but it equated aspiration with nothing more than crude acquisitiveness. This sucked out its optimism and its radicalism – but that reality was disguised by the proceeds of economic growth. Now the boom is over, and we can’t avoid the problems we face. Richard Rorty once wrote that ‘the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete and powerless’.¹ This is the experience many ex-Labour voters describe. To use dry terms like

disconnection is to underestimate the seriousness of what they feel: real pain and loss – because the very optimism of progressive politics appears to have been lost from a party that, at its best, was once a byword for it. Whether Labour remains in government or returns to opposition, we need a fundamental re-assessment of its identity – the kind of society it hopes to build.

Why? Because periods of economic and social change like this one produce major political re-alignments. This creates opportunities for Labour to reach out and join new coalitions, yet it also spells real danger. To survive and grow we must anticipate such changes, and this also requires a sense of our own history. Not just of the electoral successes and failures of the party itself, but a history of our own ideas and how they have shaped the party.

So where do we go? Let's start with a return to our relationship with liberalism. It is wrong to think of socialism as a tradition that stands in opposition to liberalism. Yet we need to be very clear about which aspects of the liberal tradition Labour can usefully embrace as its own. Mark Garnett identifies two rival modes of liberal thought; one he described as 'fleshed-out', the other as 'hollowed-out'.² In its extreme laissez-faire variant, classical 'hollowed-out' liberalism assumes a model of human behaviour that is rational, acquisitive and ruthlessly self-interested. In contrast, 'fleshed-out' New Liberalism was developed by the idealist philosopher Thomas Green. Green rejected the atomistic individualism which represents humans as impermeable, self-contained units enjoying natural rights but owing no corresponding social obligations – the classical liberal human. Instead he saw society and the individuals within it as radically interdependent: 'Without society, no persons; this is as true as that without persons ... there could be no such society as we know'.³

These ideas were taken up by Leonard Hobhouse and John Hobson. Hobhouse argues in his 1898 essay 'The Ethical Basis of Collectivism', that a progressive movement must have an ethical ideal, and it must be abstract, in that it is not yet realised and embodied in social institutions. One element of this ideal must be

liberty, but it must find a synthesis with equality, ‘since it stands for the truth that there is a common humanity deeper than all our superficial distinctions’.⁴ For Hobhouse, social progress is the development of a society in which, ‘the best life of each man is and is felt to be bound up with the best life of his fellow-citizens’ (p145). The New Liberal thinkers are rightly considered to be pioneers of the British tradition of ethical socialism. They believed in progressive taxation to compensate for the unequal bargaining power of the marketplace, and to pay for pensions and other forms of social security. They advocated the common ownership of natural monopolies and vital public services. They viewed property rights as conditional and not absolute, subject as they must be to certain public interest restrictions. They called for the limitation of working hours and new regulations to guarantee health and safety in the workplace. They stood behind the vision of a cooperative commonwealth built on explicitly moral foundations. Their influence over the leading Labour intellectuals of the early twentieth century – Richard Tawney, GDH Cole and Harold Laski – was both profound and freely acknowledged.

Ethical socialism and social liberalism together need to forge a modern politics of fellowship and solidarity. Such a politics would recognise people’s need for security, a sense of belonging and the experience of respect and self-esteem; public services would be seen to thrive on an ethic of care; its civic culture would reward generosity; it would nurture a society which valued reciprocity over competition – and what Bevan used to define as serenity. And it would also incorporate an ecological ethics. The politics of climate change shows that our interdependency goes beyond our fellow human beings to include the earth’s biosphere. In his essay in this collection Jonathan Porritt questions whether our traditions are capable of meeting this challenge. We have to evolve our traditions of equality, freedom and solidarity and re-imagine the relationship between natural life, economic activity and society. The ecological principle cannot be tacked on, to be dropped when it becomes

politically inconvenient. It must be fundamental to our political philosophies and political economy.

The late Jerry Cohen argued that the technology for giving primacy to our acquisitive and selfish desires exists in the form of a capitalist market economy.⁵ But we have not yet adequately devised the social technology capable of giving fullest expression to the generous and altruistic side of our personality. That is the task of the future left. It means new kinds of transformative political alliances. But alliances of this kind are not at odds with Labour's traditions. At its best Labour has been at the heart of broader social and cultural movements in a mutual exchange of ideas and practices. Think of Keir Hardie and his alliances with suffragettes, anti-imperialist struggles, peace movements and colonial nationalism. Hardie's socialism was never rigid, doctrinal or dogmatic. His search was for progressive coalitions, with the ILP as the backbone of this gradualist movement of alliances. He could work with progressive strands within liberalism – as he would with all elements of late nineteenth-century radical thought – yet would also steadfastly oppose its more conservative elements.

What broader social and cultural movements does Labour now stand part of? The environmental and peace movements, the global anti-poverty crusades, the campaigns for fair trade? The struggles for dignity at work, civil liberties, the rights of migrant groups and faith communities, broader cultural movements in the arts and music? This radicalism has been lost. Labour and its leaders have on occasion in the past been able to operate as a bridge between these sites and our representative democracy: the party engages with these movements, it distils them and refracts them into Westminster. We have to rediscover our capacity for this kind of politics.

A new politics of Labour

With the demise of New Labour we face an epochal task of constructing a new political economy and philosophy. We must go

back to first principles and rebuild a politics informed by ethical socialism – a radical transfer of political power, social influence, income and wealth from capital to labour. How do we rebuild a progressive agenda? What are the building blocks? Let us start with four pillars: equality, community, sustainability and democracy.

Equality

We stand for equality because we believe that individuals are of equal worth. Equality is the precondition for the liberty of all, and that is about social justice. The more resources you have, the more courses of action are open to you. As Richard Tawney argues, liberty is ‘equality in action’.⁶ The freedom of the weak rests upon the restraint of the strong; the freedom of the poor rests upon the restraint of the rich. In a society based on the principle of fellowship, no group of individuals should be so rich or poor that they are able or forced to live as a class apart. The aim is not to impose uniformity of material condition. It is for a society in which differences of wealth and income are contained within limits that allow individuals to relate to each other in a spirit of mutual regard.

To progress toward a more equal society we need a High Pay Commission as advocated by Compass.⁷ The tax system needs a fundamental overhaul to build a more equal distribution of income and wealth. Tax havens must be closed down. We should index-link benefit levels, pensions and the minimum wage to movements in average incomes. The Equality Bill recognises the different relations of power around race, gender and class, and is a welcome measure. We should also have a fair employment clause in all public contracts – to use the power of procurement to challenge race, class and gender inequalities among the working poor. In education we need to reconsider a graduate tax. The European Social Model needs to be defended and redefined. We should extend the windfall tax on bankers’ bonuses, introduce a transaction tax and reset capital gains tax. The value of equality, and the destructive impact of inequality on people’s lives is why we must intensify efforts to end child poverty.

Community

Community brings together equality and liberty, because it is about fraternity and interdependence. Community is a rejection of the logic of the market. It is about the mutual nature of human relationships: ‘I give because you need’. We no longer live in communities in which people share the same customs and culture, but the ideal of community, with its ethics of reciprocity and solidarity, remains as powerful as ever, especially at moments of crisis. We seek a mutual respect that grants self-esteem, and creates a sense of belonging. Today neuroscience and research into brain development confirm the view that human beings only fully develop and flourish within good enough social relationships.

The value of community means that we need to build the care economy for all generations at local level, with special focus on early years, support for carers and the elderly. The country needs a housing crusade, rebuilding the mixed economy through massive investment in social housing, as nearly five million are in need of a home for rent. Local authorities need to be free to borrow and invest in local priorities, to provide local bond finance for local infrastructure and to reform local taxation; too often centralised funding streams and prescriptions have warped our search for equality. We need to reconnect the excluded, and rebuild trust across communities, for example to regularise those who have no status and suffer appalling poverty and degradation from landlords, employers and criminal gangs. We need to give great help to those communities – often the poorest – which have experienced tremendous change through unparalleled levels of immigration. They are off the radar of politicians in Westminster, who remain attached to a completely out of date census. Community implies that there should be more frontline policing, more youth outreach centres, and an expansion of restorative justice and family conferencing.

This search for community and security also implies that there should be a new covenant with the military, to improve the working

lives of service men and women. We should give more mental health care, equipment, housing and support to our veterans. Why not pay for it by scrapping Trident?

Sustainability

Global warming is threatening the planet. We are approaching the ‘topping-out point’ of oil – the peak of production, after which production goes into decline. The world is facing a crisis in food production and widespread shortages of water. As a matter of urgency we must develop an ecologically sustainable economics. Stern highlighted global warming as ‘the greatest market failure in human history’. Young people are joining and leading the emerging climate movement. Like the early socialists, the new ecological movements are making politics personal and moral. They are asking the important questions about the ways we live and what it means to be human.

We need to marry up the core values of the greens and the labour movement and join the dots between democracy, equality and ecological sustainability. The ecological crisis, like the economic crisis, is hitting the people Labour was founded to protect. Social democracy must be built on sustainable foundations, and global economic recovery has to be low-carbon. Transforming economies needs strong, strategic state intervention. Let’s harness the wind and the waves so that we can move towards energy independence. We should ensure that by 2020 the UK is generating at least 15 per cent of its energy – heat, electricity and transport – from renewable sources.

As the Green New Deal group based at the New Economics Foundation has argued, we need a new green industrial activism for the twenty-first century.⁸ We can build on the ingenuity in our universities and the skills of our graduates to create millions of new green jobs and restore the place of British manufacturing in the world. Young people need those employment opportunities. Whole regions of our country have still not recovered from the years of

Thatcherism; they need an economic foundation. Our energy markets require regulation. We should introduce tough new emissions performance standards for power stations. Our transport system needs integrating and developing. Unsustainable aviation growth will wipe out carbon reductions made in other sectors. We must end the expansion of UK airports – including the runway at Heathrow. None of these policies can be implemented piecemeal. They will require an unprecedented civil mobilisation against global warming.

Democracy

To build equality, to create community and to secure a sustainable future we must strengthen our democracy. We need constitutional change and proportional representation – to push power out of Whitehall and closer to the people. The economic crisis partly arises from the failure of democracy to regulate the banks and markets properly. We should consider mutualising those parts of the finance sector currently under state control and learn from Australia regarding new forms of regulated superannuation.

Our public services need democracy; the choice agenda is not enough. The economy and our workplaces need democracy. There is a need for a radical economic democracy – for example a universal banking obligation, with new institutions to offer decent financial products to all of our communities, controls on usury, and a credit card bill of rights for consumers. Business and industry must be accountable to their employees and wider stakeholders. Wider more resilient forms of share ownership are necessary.

People have lost trust in politicians and in political parties. But there are extraordinary levels of political, cultural and community activism in our societies. People are searching for new kinds of democratic political structures and cultures that will re-connect institutions of political power with social movements and political constituencies. The precondition for a strong and vibrant social democracy is to create active participation and deliberative

decision-making processes both across society and within our parties. We must, in the words of Willy Brandt ‘dare more democracy’ and create and consolidate political trust in public life.

The future

My argument is not simply an argument about Labour. This is not about internal issues.

Think for a moment about the Tories. Declining economic growth has lost Labour its revisionist mode. But this is the same for the Tories. Cameron’s ‘Progressive Conservatism’ was built on the assumption of sharing the proceeds of growth, and that the Thatcherite early 1980s had resolved all the issues of economics. Yet when the first economic storm clouds gathered they retreated. Think about what is emerging. Think about how, despite the empathy, everything coming out from their Centre for Social Justice is punitive. Think about the party of Daniel Hannan – not some sideshow but a man whose central philosophy is hardwired into the mindset of the young Tories. Think about their laboratories in Hammersmith, Essex and Barnet.

This tells us of the brutality that lies ahead – the notion of ‘easycouncil’; of social care and housing cuts in west London; of a fundamental assault on local authorities, wrapped up in the language of quangos. Just think of the recent stories of regionalised benefits, mass privatisations and across the board cuts.

The Tories have signalled a moratorium on new house building. Look who leads their group in Europe. Explore the implications of their attraction to the vicious Wisconsin benefits model. Why is it that this revamped Thatcherism has grabbed so easily the mantle of progressivism? I would suggest it is because we have lost our language, our empathy, our generosity; because we have retreated into a philosophical framework of the right. This is not an internal debate at all. It is about protecting the most vulnerable through proudly defending a notion of a modern social democracy.

It is only by returning to our traditions, our language and our radicalism that we can confront this very dangerous force, and build an authentic political fight around a fundamentally different approach to society and humanity. But not alone. We need to develop a dialogue and a broad progressive consensus built on durable and trusting alliances.

Jon Cruddas is MP for Dagenham, London

Notes

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press 1989, p89.
2. Mark Garnett, *The Snake that Swallowed its Tail*, Societas 2004.
3. See Matt Carter, *TH Green and the Development of Ethical Socialism*, Imprint Academic 2003.
4. Leonard Hobhouse, 'The Ethical Basis of Collectivism', *International Journal of Ethics*, January, 1898, p141.
5. G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, Princeton University Press 2009.
6. Richard Tawney, *Equality*, George, Allen & Unwin 1979, p168.
7. See www.compassonline.org.uk/campaigns.
8. Nicholas Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change*, HM Treasury 2006, www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/stern_review_report.cfm.
9. www.neweconomics.org/projects/green-new-deal

The broken society versus the social recession

Alan Finlayson

How should we approach the social problems of a post-crash Britain?

One of the most important ideological battles in contemporary British politics is taking place between the Tory thesis of ‘the broken society’, and the progressive analysis of the ‘social recession’. Both respond to similar phenomena (in ways that seem to overlap) and both are capable of being applied to a wide-range of economic and political as well as social and personal experiences. But underneath the surface each offers a radically different diagnosis and remedy. If we understand this the general shape of political contests to come is much clearer.

The Conservatives and the broken society

In an interview in 2008 Oliver Letwin, Chairman of the Conservative Party, explained to me his view that, in the 1970s, the crises Britain faced were economic in nature. ‘We were bust’ was how he put it, and there was ‘a profound sense that things didn’t work’. But today, he argued, although we still face huge economic problems, the situation had changed: ‘The biggest long-term challenge we face today is a social one ... I think that the social revolution we need now to achieve is as great as the economic revolution which was required in the 1980s and 1990s’. He described that social problem with reference to the people left

behind in the march of economic progress, and now ‘living in conditions that are not just poor in monetary terms but also tend to involve worklessness, poor housing and schooling, indebtedness, addictions of various kinds, and family breakdown’. This, Letwin declared, was not only a crisis for those individuals and for their families but also a moral and practical challenge for society as a whole. It contributed to crime and had an economic cost borne by the ordinary taxpayer, but it also had ‘all sorts of spiritual and cultural ricochet effects’.

A similar sort of diagnosis has been advanced by Iain Duncan Smith’s ‘Social Justice Policy Group’, which reported to the Conservative Party in July 2007 that ‘as the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass’. The report described that class as living lives of dependency, addiction, debt and family breakdown as a result of which, it claimed, social mobility had stalled, and been replaced by ‘a mentality of entrapment, where aspiration and hope are for other people, who live in another place’.

Letwin’s remarks and Duncan Smith’s report are in tune with the Conservative critique of ‘big government’ and left-wing politics. They see the broken society as the baleful outcome of a social-democratic politics, which has undermined people’s natural capacity to exercise responsibility and care for their own communities and replaced it, they argue, with state-induced selfish individualism. Similarly, though Philip Blond has achieved a degree of political-media celebrity for appearing to be left-wing in his pro-social attitudes, the central argument in his diagnosis of the social problem is the traditional Conservative one that ‘the welfare state nationalised society because it replaced mutual communities with passive fragmented individuals’.

In his 2009 speech to the Conservative Party conference David Cameron confirmed that ‘there is such a thing as society ... there is a “we” in politics, and not just a “me”’. But he also reiterated that society is ‘not the same thing as the state’. Like Duncan Smith and

Blond, he argued that the source of the corrosion of social life can be found in the excesses of government. ‘Why is our society broken?’, he asked. Because ‘government got too big, did too much and undermined responsibility’. A month later, delivering the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture, Cameron emphasised what has been his key theme since he became Tory leader: the need to restore a sense of social responsibility. ‘As the state continued to expand’, he explained:

it took away from people more and more things that they should and could be doing for themselves, their families and their neighbours. Human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state. The result is that today, the character of our society – and indeed the character of some people themselves, as actors in society – is changing. There is less expectation to take responsibility, to work, to stand by the mother of your child, to achieve, to engage with your local community, to keep your neighbourhood clean, to respect other people and their property, to use your own discretion and judgment.

All of this was because ‘state control’ had replaced ‘moral choice and personal responsibility’. Where once there was a sense of ‘obligation and duty’, now: ‘What has come to matter most is not our place in wider society, but our own personal journey and our right to pursue our own happiness regardless of others around us ... The paradox at the heart of big government is that by taking power and responsibility away from the individual, it has only served to individuate them’.

Cameron’s is a fairly well-developed argument about the nature of the current crisis facing Britain, and its resolution. It names the crisis as moral, as consisting of a selfish form of individualism, because of which people refuse to take responsibility for themselves, each other or their society. But his analysis of the sources of this

selfishness focuses on the deleterious effects of the social-democratic state upon self-reliance. Other causes are downplayed – for example the traditionalist Tory view that selfishness is a by-product of ‘the sixties’ (a clear element of Blond’s argument and one source of Tory interest in ‘pro-marriage’ tax policies, but only hinted at by Cameron with phrases such as ‘our personal journey’). Causes to which the left might draw attention, including the effects of neoliberal competitiveness and inequality, are of course ignored. Naming the nanny state as responsible for so much of our moral malaise enables the Cameronite argument to recruit the ‘Clarksonite’ critics and their fantasy of totalitarian health and safety officers (a fantasy which allows them to imagine themselves true men and truly rugged individuals, asserting themselves against a feminine state every time they drive their car a little bit too fast).

The remedy that follows from all this is the returning of power to people, the rolling back of the state, and what Cameron calls a ‘rolling forward of society’. Government, he says, must ‘create the avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop ... actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal’. This part of the argument can then appeal to the wonkish advocates of ‘double devolution’, community power, social entrepreneurship and civic responsibility. Cameron has thus far failed to articulate this unified conception to the public at large, but he has made great efforts to pitch it to the broad-based political class that he hopes will sanction his claim to rule before a passive electorate.

Compass and the social recession

The concept of ‘social recession’ came into the British political vocabulary in the first Compass ‘Programme for Renewal’ report, *The Good Society*. It was used to refer to a range of pathologies indicative of a decline in the quality of social relationships and social solidarity. For instance, for Jonathan Rutherford a key indication of

our crisis is the increasingly poor mental health of children and adolescents. Stress, depression, bullying and violence, he argues, originate in a collapse of both families and wider social networks, and are part of a culture of aggressive (because defensive and nervous) individualism. But the cause of this is not the intrusive state: it is the intrusive economy. 'Economic resources are no longer just machines and what is dug out of the ground, but the thinking, imagination and feelings of individuals', writes Rutherford of the 'knowledge' or 'creative' economy; 'cultural' capitalism 'is extending commodification into the personal and emotional life of individuals'. In work we are permanently appraised and assessed and facilitated to align our values and aspirations with those of our employer. Out of work we are exhorted to be active consumers, replacing social activities that might give us orientation and meaning with another form of economic activity: shopping. This is emphasised by Neal Lawson when he argues that 'turbo-consumerism' has come to dominate not only our economy but our public and private life. For Lawson, consumerism (as well as the debt it demands we build up) contributes to a more general hollowing out of society, and to the intensification of a culture of atomised individuals defined by what they choose to buy. As a result, inequalities and insecurities have become ever more intense, and individual competition has supplanted social solidarity. Crucially, for Lawson, this situation hinders the very forms of politics most needed if we are to address our economic and political crises. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, neoliberal politics encourages individuals 'to devise individual solutions to socially generated problems, and to do it individually, using their own skills and individually possessed assets'. That in turn puts people into competition with each other and makes communal solidarity seem 'irrelevant if not downright counter-productive'.

For Compass, then, Britain's crisis is social: we have undermined the public realm of trust and responsibility, replacing it with the self-interest of economic activity. This has deleterious effects on

individuals, both directly – because we become riddled with anxiety about keeping up and keeping in the game – and indirectly – because of the personal debt and overworking needed to sustain the consumerist behemoth. The argument can then be extended to the economic crisis, in emphasising the extent to which the banking crisis was the outcome of individualised and anti-social greed, with people acting without concern for the wider, public, ramifications of their behaviour; and also to the political crisis, in that our politics has been reduced to a kind of retail competition for the votes of individuals, squeezing aside once vibrant domains of collective interaction, reflection and participation. Compass has developed this analysis consistently and over a period of time, and given it activist embodiment in campaigns, for instance against the commercialisation of childhood, and for a public and non-commercial post-office that would provide new forms of social banking.

The broken society and the social recession compared

What is at first most interesting about the theses of the ‘social recession’ and of the ‘broken society’ is the extent to which they appear to converge: a section of the British left and of the British right agree that a central issue facing our country is the growth of a form of asocial or even anti-social individualism that has left our common spaces denuded; that the individualism of uniqueness and eccentricity championed by J.S. Mill has been supplanted by a selfish and acquisitive individualism that perceives the world as nothing more than a series of opportunities for self-satisfaction. But this is a convergence in appearances only. In their origin and spirit the two could not be further apart. The Conservative thesis finds selfish individualism to be a product of a rights-based culture, and of the erosion of responsibility by the state. The social recession thesis finds it to be the moral product of neoliberal economic utilitarianism. And, for these reasons, the remedies they propose are also quite different.

The Cameronite response to the erosion of responsibility is actually rather contradictory. It is no surprise to find a call for withdrawal of the state from various areas in order to make way for the vibrant energies of voluntary society: instead of state schools, parents should found their own; instead of 'state-driven multiculturalism', power should be devolved to local communities and smaller community groups supported; instead of a home-office-led crime strategy there should be directly elected police commissioners. But Cameron does not think that 'pro-social behaviours' will simply reappear where the state withdraws: government has a role in stimulating such behaviour: 'We want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society ... we understand that the big society is not just going to spring to life on its own: we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen. We need to use the state to remake society'.

For Cameron that translates into the promotion of social entrepreneurs and the provision of training for community activists. But also, if somewhat more nebulously, it means facilitating the presence of social norms – through such means as the proposed national citizens service, but also through policies informed by behavioural psychology. It is in this that Cameronism is most the heir to Blairism. For both, policy problems are identified as deriving from the poor or deviant behaviours of individuals. 'Behaviour change' is thus a legitimate goal of government. The Tories perceive themselves as different from new Labour in that they will not seek to make up for poor behaviours with state action but rather, indirectly encourage better ones. But just this kind of behaviourist psychology and economics has been at the heart of much of new Labour's incentives-based approach to welfare and public service reform. More broadly, within current British political culture, strategies for engendering behaviour change are the meat and drink of the more fashionable think-tanks, which have responded to the evident limitations of rational and public choice models of behaviour by expanding their reach into the evolutionary and

neurological sciences, the better to refine the tools of societal micromanagement.

Where the thesis of the broken society starts from the proposition that people's behaviour is somehow going wrong, the implication of the Compass analysis is quite the opposite: in acting as selfish individuals, in promoting short-term satisfaction over longer-term progress, people are not in any way deviating from, or failing to live up to, a social norm. They are behaving exactly in accordance with the social norms that dominate contemporary society. For Compass, selfish individualism has not arisen because of an accident or an oversight: it is the demanded outcome of the forms of social and economic organisation that have been promoted by political and economic elites over the last two decades; it is not the absence of values that is the problem but their content. Consequently, for Compass, the necessary response to the crises we face certainly involves changes in behaviour (what meaningful politics does not propose changes to behaviour?). But these cannot be engendered surreptitiously, and cannot be targeted at just a few people: acquisitive individualism is not a trait confined to those on benefits, but is central to the behaviours of the elites whose actions precipitated the financial crisis. For Compass, the biggest mistake of both Blairism and Cameronism is to analyse the behaviour of individuals as if they were unaffected by the wider cultural economy around them. If we are to criticise parents for letting their children watch too much rubbish on television, should we not also criticise the people who make and market the rubbish to them? If we are to criticise the people who choose to follow a diet that makes them overweight, lazy and ill, should we not also criticise those who make and aggressively market junk foods to them? And if we are to criticise people for mismanaging their personal finances and defaulting on their debt repayments, must we not also criticise those who sold those loans, purchased that debt, and repackaged and resold it in search of an increase in (apparent) quarterly returns?

Conclusion

The thesis of the ‘broken society’ and the analysis of the ‘social recession’ may seem similar but in fact they are radically different ways of trying to understand and move on from ‘the crash’. The Tory thesis is motivated by a knee-jerk rejection of social democracy and welfarism, to which is added a fantasy about a suppressed ‘social responsibility’. This issues in the incoherent advocacy of intensified state intervention to induce the kind of socially responsible behaviours that will obviate state intervention. In short, the thesis of the broken society is a form of ideological dogma and prejudice applied independently of any analysis of what has actually gone wrong.

By contrast, the analysis of the social recession derives from a description of the real conditions in which we live. We are today far more dependent on each other than at any time in human history. Our social and economic order is a complex division of labour in which the provider of any one good or service is necessarily reliant on the providers of many others, and in which all rely on a common framework, not only of laws and regulations but also of the public goods that enable the whole thing to function. But we have allowed wealth and power to accumulate excessively in one part of that arrangement, enabling a minority to ignore the common framework, to avoid the laws and regulations by which the rest of us live and to cut themselves off from supporting the public goods on which they too rely. If our society is broken then it is at the top, not the bottom that the damage is concentrated. Furthermore, the minority at the top has sought to dominate social and economic life to its own advantage and to make public goods into sources of more private wealth for itself. In so doing it has declared the common framework a hindrance and an unjust restriction on freedom. The outcome has been an erosion of the social culture and institutions within which human beings can truly flourish. In the name of private wealth we have reduced investment in the public good: the

result is a recession of the social that leaves us ill-equipped to face the mammoth collective challenges that are upon us: the economy, the environment, education, cultural pluralism and so on.

These are facts about which the progressive left must be clear and which we should express with all the certainty and self-confidence with which the neoliberal and libertarian has asserted an isolationist fantasy. The crisis we face is the outcome of that fantasy, the articulation of which legitimated the self-interested accumulation of vast wealth and power by a very few people, who then expected the very same public realm they refused to support to make good on their inadequacy. The only alternative is to invest (time and energy as well as money) in repairing and rebuilding a public realm that is protected from those who would reduce it to just another commodity. These truths should be at the heart of our politics ‘after the crash’.

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Alan Finlayson is Reader in Politics at Swansea University. He is the author of *Making Sense of New Labour* (Lawrence and Wishart), *Contemporary Political Thought: A Reader and Guide* (Edinburgh University Press) and *Democracy and Pluralism: The Political Thought of William E. Connolly* (Routledge). He is currently running a research project examining the development of British political rhetoric.

Interpreting the crisis

Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey

Doreen Massey and Stuart Hall discuss ways of understanding the current crisis

Doreen There are many different ways of thinking about the current financial and political crisis, but certainly one useful way is to think about the present as a conjuncture – this way of analysing was very productive in the discussions about Thatcherism in the late 1970s and 1980s in *Marxism Today* and elsewhere, in which you played a leading role. Perhaps we should start by thinking about what conjunctural analysis is, and how it differs from other kinds of analysis.

Stuart It's partly about periodisation. A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another. These are two distinct conjunctures, separated by the crisis of the 1970s. As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, 'fuse in a ruptural unity'. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. It may be that society moves on to another version of the same thing (Thatcher to Major?), or to a somewhat transformed version (Thatcher to Blair); or relations

can be radically transformed. The question is, can we look at the present situation in that way?

Doreen The other thing that's really striking is the importance of thinking of things as complex moments, where different parts of the overall social formation may themselves, independently, be in crisis in various ways. So although we see this moment as a big economic crisis, it is also a philosophical crisis in some kinds of ways – or it could be, if we got hold of the narrative. So it's really important that we don't only 'do the economy', as it were.

Stuart Absolutely not. It is not a moment to fall back on economic determinism, though it may be tempting to do so, since the current crisis seems to start in the economy. But any serious analysis of the crisis must take into account its other 'conditions of existence'. For example, the ideological – the way market fundamentalism has become the economic common sense, not only of the west but globally; politically – the way New Labour has been disconnected from its political roots and evolved as the second party of capital, transforming the political terrain; socially – the way class and other social relations have been so reconfigured under consumer capitalism that they fragment, undermining the potential social constituencies or agencies for change. We can't ignore the way the financial sector has asserted its dominance over the economy as a whole, or indeed its centrality to the new forms of global capitalism. But we must address the complexity of the crisis as a whole. Different levels of society, the economy, politics, ideology, common sense, etc, come together or 'fuse'. The definition of a conjunctural crisis is when these 'relatively autonomous' sites – which have different origins, are driven by different contradictions, and develop according to their own temporalities – are nevertheless 'convened' or condensed in the same moment. Then there is crisis, a break, a 'ruptural fusion'.

Doreen As you were speaking, I was thinking that maybe one of the things that the neoliberals, including New Labour, have managed to

do is almost to separate the economic crisis from the philosophical one. There was a period, when the financial crisis was first in the news, when people were beginning to change the way they were thinking about the economy and consider alternative ways of doing things – for example there was a discernible shift to investing more in the co-op, talking about mutualisation, arguing that we need to get rid of all this individualism and greed. And yet today here we are sitting here with Cameron saying that the big problem is the public deficit, and the big state. The economic crisis is partly being solved, at least for the time being, and that is seen as the only problem. The implosion of neoliberal ideology is no longer on the agenda. It's as though they've separated those two instances again.

Stuart For a brief moment some people did indeed say 'this economic model isn't working any more'. But the separation between the economic and the ideological seems to have reasserted itself. This has been characteristic of our whole period. From very early on, New Labour said, really, there are no major ideological or economic questions left; there is only 'managing society'. New Labour was very successful in boxing up questions in this way – ones which didn't seem to offer an ideological or political choice. What began to happen – certainly in the moment of the downturn and perhaps a bit before that – is that some of these connections began to come to the surface. But there has been a failure by Labour to address them or to find a way of narrativising them into a crisis of the whole system. Since New Labour shares with the financial sector a view about how critical it is for the global capitalist system to continue to work, they are satisfied to say, 'In the long run, everything depends on getting back to business as usual'.

Doreen And we can distract attention by having the ministers and the parliamentarians taken to task over expenses and suchlike. *They* become the bogeys, not the bankers.

Stuart Politics is often the source of a spectacle designed to divert

you from what is really important. The furore over MPs' expenses was really an instance of that. Of course, in an era when New Labour 'is extremely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich', MPs will put their snouts in the trough too. But I'm sure most of the deep public feeling, the slightly irrational anger, about MPs' expenses is because people can't get at the culprits.

Doreen I think there's also another reason, which is that we pay the MPs and are therefore entitled to criticise them – they are in some sense accountable to us. Whereas the bankers are part of this thing called market forces, and it is now embedded deeply within us, precisely as a result of the past thirty years, to think of market forces as somehow natural, and not criticisable in a simple way – morally, ethically, politically. We experience the financial system as being beyond any possibility of intervention. That's part of what is so disabling, precisely the ideological moment in the politics that we've inherited.

Stuart I think the ideological dimension is very critical – the way in which the whole political discourse has been 'cleansed', so that the public interest, public ownership, common goods, equality, the redistribution of wealth, the stubborn facts about poverty and inequality, etc, all became 'unspeakable'. That's an instance of the way ideology, through erasure, provides one of the conditions of existence of politics and the economy, and thus of the crisis. Thatcherism made it part of common sense that you can't calculate the common interest. 'There is no such thing as society'. All you can calculate is individual self-interest, and then the hidden hand of the market will make that work for, or trickle down to, society as a whole. The big shift here, of course, is that this has become New Labour's philosophy too.

Doreen It's also become deep within individual people's philosophy – 'you can't do anything about it, it's the market, isn't it'. It's right at the heart of the way in which we look at the world.

Stuart It operates both at the level of common sense and at what Gramsci called the level of philosophy, i.e. the new win-win economics, the mathematical formulae which tell investors how to make money out of making money, the illusion that it's an economy in which everyone profits. Gramsci would say that a hegemonic settlement only works when ideology captures or 'hegemonises' common sense; when it becomes so taken-for-granted that its ways of looking at the world seem to be the only ways in which ordinary people can calculate what's good and what's not, what they should support and what they shouldn't, what's good for them and what's good for society.

Doreen Before we speak, before we think, it's the framework within which we think.

Stuart Exactly. But I don't think the governing philosophy always becomes common sense. It takes a while, and a mastery of the political field. Hegemony is something which has to be struggled for, which is always in process.

Doreen It also takes a huge amount of work. And quite explicit work. And they know they need to do it. When I was researching the City of London, the finance centre (see *World City*, Polity Press 2007), I was amazed by the amount of stuff they produced. Reports, pieces of research, interviews on the radio, the television, everywhere, to convince us that without them we are all dead. That they are the golden goose of the economy. They're doing the same now, with seeking to divide private sector workers from public sector workers. Labour does not put in that effort to create shifts in people's hearts and minds. It just listens to focus groups. It doesn't itself go out and try and create a new common sense, a new narrative – partly because it doesn't want to, but also ...

Stuart ... I don't think it knows what it would create a new common sense around.

Doreen It's got so used to having a so-called 'natural base', that it doesn't know how to create one through its own efforts. Which leads us into one of the other concepts that is associated with thinking about conjunctures, and those periods where there's a particular political settlement, and that's hegemony.

Stuart Not every political force or philosophy which is dominant at a particular period achieves widespread consent. It is not always the case that the governing political philosophy is spoken by everybody as if they're already inside it. It is when it becomes 'just how things are' that it wins consent and enters common sense. And at that point the political regime or philosophy has achieved a more settled, long-term, deeper form of control.

Doreen And it's about that kind of interpellation of people's interests into your story. And Cameron can be seen to be making efforts to do that, you can see it in a lot of his language. And something like Thatcher's allowing people to buy their council houses was a perfect mode of drawing people in.

Stuart And on and on and on. That work has to be done so it can reach a level of unconsciousness where people aren't aware that they're speaking ideology at all. The ideology has become 'naturalised', simply part of nature. 'Market forces' was a brilliant linguistic substitute for 'the capitalist system', because it erased so much, and, since we all use the market every day, it suggests that we all somehow already have a vested interest in conceding everything to it. It conscripted us. Now, when you get to that point, the political forces associated with that project, and the philosophical propositions that have won their way into common sense, are very tough to dislodge – you can't just vote them out, or kick them out of power.

Doreen And it's not simply a matter of logic either. You have to have an alternative appeal.

Stuart Yes, partly because ideology is never just rubbish; it always has a basis in real things. People know that a lot of the nationalised industries were extremely inefficient and, in their own way, some of the privatised industries were more efficient. Of course, there are social costs to that. But nobody talks about the costs. They just talk about ‘efficiency’. What drove that shift? Constantly associating ‘the market’ with positive things like freedom, choice, and thus the necessity of a privatised economy – that’s the logic. You can see these chains of connection being forged in people’s everyday thought and language, as well as in political debate and argument, in media discussion and in theory. People have lost a sense of where the discourse came from and what it leaves out. And when that happens, they can be seen as being subjected to the discourse. New Labour knew all about that. The logic of ‘spin’ was to detach concepts from their previous associations and shift them to new meanings. You can also see this process when they banished ‘equality’ from the vocabulary and started to talk about fairness; when they banished ‘capital’ and started to talk about free markets; when they gave up on ‘society’ and started to use that weasel word ‘community’ instead.

Doreen Do you think that finance is crucial to the conjuncture that we’ve just been through – if it’s ended? Is the finance constellation at the nucleus of the kind of hegemony that we’ve seen during the last thirty years or so? I think it is, and that certain ways of thinking have come from it. In a number of ways.

Stuart I certainly think it is. My understanding of the current conjuncture is that it begins with the collapse of the welfare state and Keynesian demand-management, and all of the thinking that went with that. The 1970s is a period of upheaval, and Thatcherism resolves that crisis into a new conjuncture. The new market-forces conjuncture has two phases to it: the Thatcherite destruction of everything associated with the welfare state, letting market forces rip, privatising the state, high unemployment, and battering society

as a whole into the acceptance of a new order. Then, when even the Tories think this can't work for much longer, funnily enough, a transformed and deeply co-opted New Labour provides that other, more human, face. But the two phases should be regarded as a single conjuncture which we can characterise as the triumph of neoliberalism. I know it's an inadequate word, but it's the only one we have for characterising what defines the whole arc. Whether finance capital is so dominant in the first period, I'm not sure.

Doreen I was working in the GLC at that time. And the debates within our bit of the GLC, our arguments about what we should do, were very much concerned with the question of the future of London, and of course, one issue was London as a financial city; and what was going on during the early period of Thatcherism was the disruption of the manufacturing base, in very serious ways. That and the Big Bang. At least some of the preconditions for the shift in the economy were laid down at that time. During this last period, the thirty years, forty years, that we're talking about, the dominance, and the *nature* of the dominance, of finance – partly because of decline of manufacturing – has been sharper and different. And also, crucially, it has become more global.

Stuart So, in the story, we'd have to distinguish those two things – the central place of finance and financial investment in the City generally, and what is then distinctive about the way in which finance capital emerges as the centrepiece – at the expense of other elements of capital itself – in the period since Thatcherism.

Doreen Yes, and there is work going on in this area, some of it on the way in which – partly because of the absence, suddenly, of manufacturing as a voice, and of the trade unions also – the pure matter of exchange, rather than production for the market, became the most important thing. But we should also understand that what the City – capital C – grew fat on wasn't actually globalisation, it was privatisation, and deregulation. Who benefited from the

privatisation of pensions? Who benefited massively from all the contracting out, and the PPIs, PFIs and whatever they were called? And so there was an articulation in the City of a particular kind of economic thinking that – though in broad terms it is like any kind of capitalism – has a sharper focus in finance, and doesn't have to deal with nuts and bolts and widgets and textiles and mining. It's a pure form of exchange in some senses.

Stuart Isn't it also important to look at the way in which finance has come to govern the whole business economy, not just the City? The whole global corporate world has become much more oriented towards finance.

Doreen And the manufacturing corporations themselves also operate as finance companies. Their cash-flows and their cash-holdings, and the way in which they operate, also has that mindset within it.

Stuart This dominance makes it perfectly clear why, then, if something goes wrong in that sphere it's going to radiate out. It affects all the others.

Doreen And why potentially – let's hope it does – it could blow the ideological side apart as well. But that's what's being covered up at the moment, that's where we've got to go for it. How do we get it into public debate? Where are the social forces that could take it on? The Labour Party is totally incapable of doing this. It has bought into the neoliberal narrative. So it's not prepared to do it. As we said before, it doesn't know how to do it.

Stuart And also, I think it sees those forces as more permanent than the crisis. For them, the crisis will pass but finance capital will live on.

Doreen And Labour has really bought into the idea that finance is our strong economic card. Rather than being – in its present form – a force for destruction, both within the country and in the world at

large. It still really thinks it's the golden goose. Britain has been massively important within the construction of that, especially with the role of the City in introducing privatisation around the world – all those folk from here and the United States that went over to Moscow and told them that democracy was equivalent to marketisation. However, what also interests me is that – even if finance capital is not going to be knocked off its perch – it is clear that the crisis in some ways has given a further impetus to a fracturing of US hegemony and economic dominance. And there are lots of campaigns that are trying to address what the City does around the world, so there are things happening here too. And that takes us back to social forces – the Labour Party's not going to give us a lead on this.

Stuart I agree. Nevertheless, the Labour Party remains an important arena where these contradictory things are worked out, so we can't ignore it. It dominates the political terrain in which you have to operate; it is one critical site, because it is a kind of nodal point in the overall balance of social and political forces. For good or ill, it is still central to British politics. The argument about social forces is often read as if the Labour is so co-opted that it doesn't matter what happens to it.

Doreen We have to address it. It is there, it's the elephant. But it is also important to look out beyond parliamentary and party politics to recognise the potential of social forces.

Stuart Hall and **Doreen Massey** are both founding editors of *Soundings*.

This is a shorter version of a conversation that is printed in full in *Soundings* 44, spring 2010.

The Consumer Industrial Complex

Neal Lawson

Our addiction to consuming is a key source of our complicity in the system that created the financial crisis

As the thrust of this ebook suggests, the progressive split of the last one hundred years needs to be healed in a way that creates a dynamic and modern form of left politics. The initial rift happened because the era of mass production and the centralisation of government it encouraged, in combination with a growing mass working-class movement, squeezed out the space for liberalism.¹ But that era of steam-age production leading to steam-age politics is now itself in serious decline.² The first response to its decline was Thatcherism; the second a humanised form of neoliberalism in the shape of New Labour. They have come, gone and failed – in the former case because they tried to replace old-style collectivism with rampant individualism, and in the later case because they tried to apply that rampant individualism to old-style collectivism. New Labour was Old Labour plus Thatcherism.

The failure of both Thatcherism and Blairism was not down to a lack of boldness or even clarity, but resulted from a fundamental misjudgement about the times in which we live. We can still be Marxist enough to recognise that the economic base and the way in which we produce things continues in large part to shape the social superstructure – that is, the mode of production is a pretty decisive factor in determining the culture and social relations of the world. And the world today is not the mass production or bureaucratic

apparatus of the postwar decades; but nor is it myriad individual actors serving their own interests in a loose collection of firms and free markets. Instead the culture of our economy and society is simultaneously breaking down and realigning around new forms of production and administration. The trend is neither towards masses or markets, but to alliances, networks, cooperatives and social enterprises. Our economy and society are more pluralist. But our politics isn't. This means that our political parties and processes are unable to meet the twin crisis of inequality and sustainability. And the failure of politics to meet the challenges of our time creates a third crisis: that of democracy itself.

Why is this the case? Why, given the crash and looming climate chaos, does nothing seem to change? All three main parties coalesce around the same essentially pro-growth, pro-market, pro-City agenda. The only game in town seems to be the return to the status quo ante as soon as possible. But why no revolt? Why aren't new ideas taking centre stage and mobilising not just thinkers but activists and the general public? The government comes up with only the mildest and weakest of rebukes to the bankers in the shape of a one-off tax; the extent of political reform is the sleight-of-hand of a possible shift from first-past-the-post to the alternative vote, which even if enacted is unlikely to change anything much. The planet burns and the poor get poorer and the political system seems unable and unwilling to respond. The question again is why?

There are several spaces where responses can be found. The first is the voting system. First-past-the-post forces parties to focus on a few swing voters in a few swing seats. It gives undue power to Rupert Murdoch and the *Daily Mail*. But both the Attlee and Thatcher government won and ruled under FPTP. So while a shift to proportional representation would be a huge step, the voting system can't explain everything. A second reason for the lack of response to the crisis is the decline of class as a salient mobilising political force. Class still matters enormously, but is now much harder to turn into effective political action. This gives the left a

problem of agency, which in turn raises the question of what kind of political narrative could mobilise cross-class alliances. But this has always been the case for the centre-left. A third reason, of course, is the reality of globalised capitalism and the hegemony of neoliberal thinking that underpins it. Not only can finance, and to a lesser extent manufacturing, play global blackmail – accept our low tax and flexible labour market agenda, or we are off – but systematic and coherent alternatives to market fundamentalism are ruled out. Capital went global and democracy has failed to keep up. But why not more calls now for global rules to restrain global markets? All of these factors hold the left back; they are challenging if not daunting barriers; but they do not explain the lack of meaningful response in the face of the multiple crises we face. So what does?

I think we have to look at the cultural dominance of advanced capitalism to understand the grip of market fundamentalism on our political system; and that means an understanding of consumerism. It is the grip of consumption on the lives of the majority that explains the hold of neoliberalism economically and politically; a grip that is so firm and so deep, that even after the crash and in the face of environmental disaster, the prospect of other ways of being human and free have become hard to even imagine let alone enact. If we don't shop then what on earth do we do?

A nation of shoppers

Britain has turned from a nation of shopkeepers into a nation of shoppers. This is no longer the British Isles but the British Aisles. New shopping centres like Westfield in London are opening up, and more shopping Meccas are being built across the land. There are 121 mobiles for every 100 people, and that's no surprise when you consider that there are over 70 million credit cards in circulation. Shopping frenzy around new store openings and product lines is no longer news. A £400 handbag is not a sign of madness but a common aspiration. Girls are now being named Armani and

L’Oreal, and boys will fight, sometimes to death, over the ownership of the right pair of trainers. Both demonstrate the dominant place of the brand in our lives. A Downing Street strategy paper recently declared ‘the UK is now a consumer society’.

Shopping is not all we do, but it has become the abiding feature of our lives. Why do we live in a world in which we think ‘we are worth it’, where we feel ‘we can be ashamed of our mobile’? Why do we exhaust ourselves hamster-wheeling as we work harder for our Prada? Shopping is not all we do, but it has become the most important thing that shapes our lives and our world.

This turbo-consumerism has not happened by accident but by design. The Consumer Industrial Complex is a vast army of designers, manufacturers, advertisers, marketers, retail consultants and high-street chains whose only purpose is to provide a never ending conveyor belt of wants that are turned into needs. Clothing, holidays, cars, bags and watches are refined and developed, often by miniscule design tweaks, and then sold to us as the next must-have item. We are bombarded with over 3,500 brand images every day of our lives. That is 200 for every waking hour. They design shops and shopping centres to disorientate and confuse us. There is an elaborate science of music, smells, product placement and loyalty card databases to get us to stay longer and buy more than we planned. It leaves us with the absurdity of the six-blade razor; and if they introduced seven we would buy that too. Not because we really want or need yet another blade but just because it is there. Because not to take up the option of something ‘that is the best’, ‘improved’ and ‘new’ no longer make sense!

But of course we are not forced to buy. Ultimately we are willing participants on the treadmill of turbo-consumption. This is because we consume not just as a physical requirement of life but increasingly as an emotional necessity. This has two important implications.

First, what we buy is immensely important to us because it is the most potent way in which we form our identities and gain respect

and recognition from others. We are very social beings, and we send and receive signals about who we are through what we buy. The type of clothes we wear, the house we live in, the car we drive and the holidays we take are all expressions of our character and our personality. Remember, the term 'brand' comes from the mark placed on cattle to distinguish ownership. Today we brand ourselves to show what social groups we want to belong to.

Second, through shopping we buy status. Just as we have a deep-seated need to belong, we also have an unbound capacity to compete. Our place in the pecking order matters, and we can't help looking around and comparing ourselves to others. Do we have the latest gadgets and fashions? Have we been to the right restaurants and holiday destination? This aspect of human nature is exploited by the Consumer Industrial Complex, which channels our need to belong and to compete into the emotional engine of 24/7 cradle-to-grave shopping.

There is a final important function shopping increasingly plays in our life. As society becomes more secular we have been left with an emotional and moral vacuum. What separates us from all other animals is the knowledge that we are going to die. Without religion it is an intolerable thought. There must be something to believe in, and so instead of worshipping god we now worship Gucci. And we try to cheat death by buying back our youth through clothes, Botox and surgery. There is no higher purpose to life, just higher purchase. That is why shopping malls are our new cathedrals. Where once stained-glass windows gave us an insight into the glory of a possible afterlife, now shop windows let us peer at the good life in the here and now. Prada, Boss and Hermes are our new religions, and celebrities like Paris Hilton and David Beckham our new high priests.

Life on the consumer treadmill obviously brings its rewards; otherwise we wouldn't keep at it. But it is not designed to make us happy. If we were fulfilled and satisfied we wouldn't return to the shops as quickly as the Consumer Industrial Complex needs us to, in order to sustain their profits and therefore their own ability to

spend. Instead, the goal is to sell us dissatisfaction so we go back for more. This is making us unhappy. In Britain the levels of mental health problems are double those in continental Europe, as we try to cope with a life of competitive consumerism. It also results in record levels of obesity, addiction and debt for those who lose control on the treadmill and run too fast. For the rest of us life is an exhausting struggle just to keep up. In the last ten years we have doubled our consumption but we are no happier. We have got richer but life is no better. In many ways it is worse.

Consumerism and political life

The systematic reproduction of society through the seductive powers of consumption then impacts on political life. Politics stops being the clash of competing visions of the good society and becomes a managerial exercise in how we can spend more.

Aspiration is only viewed through the prism of having more. The economy and the market are not to be transformed: they are the only answer to any hope of social justice – and this despite the fact that social justice is impossible within the context of market fundamentalism, where competition for superiority is an abiding feature. Meanwhile the public sector, which should provide shelter and respite from the market, is made-over to look and feel like the high street, because the market is the only model we have of efficiency. Schools and hospitals are branded and rebranded, contestability and choice (however lame) are offered to us, no longer as citizens but as consumers. Democracy withers as parties target voters like shoppers, working out what messages work with which swing voters, as they attempt to detoxify their brand. For Pepsi versus Coke read New Labour versus New Conservatives.

And so we slip into a vicious cycle. The more we shop the less time and space we have for other things – like being citizens. The barriers to the advance of the market into the public realm come down further. The power of politicians seeps away as they concede

the operational supremacy of the market. They feel they can do little through the state and society to control the economy, and so politics is diminished. It makes no difference. And the less it does the more the market steps in, further individualising our response to the systemic risk that global markets open up. We buy individualised answers to education, health and crime. This process of social withdrawal followed by economic creep is increasingly ratcheted up. We get to the point where people know that politicians offer no alternatives – so they do what they can. They shop. At least it gives them a respite and some compensation. All of this helps explain the ruling out of alternatives. Despite the crash it seems there is still nothing left to do but shop. After all, isn't it the obvious and only answer to the recession and the rebooting of the economy?

What is really frightening is that we are as yet only at the frontiers of lives that are all consuming. The Consumer Industrial Complex is developing new ways to create wants and turn them into needs. If you are in a bar and a group of trendy young people are talking loudly about how great a new drink is, are they for real? If a 'tourist' stops you in the street and asks you to take their picture with their amazing new camera and they point out some of its unique features, are they for real too? Or are they all paid to be there as part of the new 'buzz marketing' industry that is based on the power of peer group advocacy but in truth is just a deceit. Every time you search the internet, every site you visit is recorded, so that your interests and hobbies are logged to ensure you are sent the pop-up adverts you are most likely to click. There is nothing that won't be known about us in the pursuit of selling more. Meanwhile scientists are working out which ingredients in food persuade our brains that we are never full up, so that we keep on eating. And neurologists are working out how the 'buy button' in our brain works, so that they can trigger purchasing impulses. Increasingly we will be born to buy.

Our goal should not be the end of shopping. It can of course be fun and rewarding. But there is a balance that we should seek, so

that consumption doesn't take up so much time and energy, or be so destructive. In particular, it cannot be the only way in which to define the good society and the good life, crushing all other alternatives. But to strike a better balance we need to take some responsibility ourselves to buy less and buy better through ethical consumption. Millions are already doing both. One recent survey found that a quarter of 29-59 year olds have downsized their life by at least 40 per cent of their income. This is not a question of people moving from the city to the country, but of their choosing to work less, earn less and have more time for themselves, their family and their friends. They are swapping excessive consumption for a different and, I would argue, better quality of life. But securing balance isn't something we can do alone; it will also require collective effort, through organisations such as Transition Towns. And government must play its role. If Sweden can ban advertising to children and restrict the spread of consumption why can't we? And on some issues we won't have any choice but to cut back. If everyone on earth lived like we do, more than three planets would be needed to keep us all going. There isn't enough water, food or energy to go round. It will need government action to plan the fair allocation of scarce resources.

More than anything, the balance in our life we need and crave, and simple satisfactions such as having the time to read our children a bedtime story, will come from a different vision of the good life. The celebrated economist J.K. Galbraith once said that 'there are many visions of the good society, the treadmill is not one of them'. Our lives are too important and too precious to be wasted in consuming. There is so much more to life. Not least through the discovery of skills, crafts and jobs in which we can make goods which stand the test of time instead of being instantly disposable. And through greater pride in what we make we can create more solid and enduring identities.

A social liberalism or liberal socialism needs to start with a vision of the good society; one in which the quality of life is not

confused with the quantity of the things we own. A world in which greater equality is possible because we are not in a never ending status race with each other. A world in which we practise one-planet living rather than eight. A world where aspiration is not just linked to acquiring but to learning, participating, cooperating and caring. A world in which democracy is not voting with your feet as you switch from shop to shop – but about competing visions of the good society. All of this means we start from the individual in the true tradition of mainstream liberalism, but we recognise the individual in their social context not as the atomised utility maximisers of the neoliberals but as fully rounded human beings.

We die wishing not that we had owned more stuff but had had more time with the people we love. The crash is a wake-up call; our lives are out of our control. We can take control back, but only if we do it together and break the grip of consumption on our lives, our society and our planet, by posing a richer and more fulfilling vision of what it is to be truly human. If progressives could align themselves round such a vision – I'd buy into that. After all, Liberty is more than just a posh shop in London's west end

Neal Lawson is Chair of Compass and author of *All Consuming* (Penguin 2009).

Notes

1. *Freedom: Three perspectives on the meaning of liberty in the 21st century*, CentreForum, April 2006.
2. *Dare more democracy*, Neal Lawson, Compass 2005

Sustainability and social justice

Caroline Lucas

The synergy between green policies and social justice

In a speech billed as the first of the Labour Party's general election campaign of 2010, Prime Minister Gordon Brown set out the vision which he optimistically hopes will win over Britain's disillusioned voters, and persuade them into giving his party a fourth term. Addressing a Fabian Society audience, Brown revealed a renewed focus on a band of voters defined as those to target for victory by Labour's focus groups and behind-the-scenes pollsters: the aspirational middle class.

New Labour has built its twenty-first century identity around the idea that, in the words of John Prescott before the 1997 election, 'we are all middle class now'. This was the mantra that symbolised the party's movement beyond its working-class base; and it prepared the ground for Labour to abandon many of its traditional socialist principles in favour of a 'Third Way' approach, leaving behind the ideology of the left, and proclaiming itself – in the now famous words of Peter Mandelson – 'intensely relaxed' about people becoming 'filthy rich'.

In one way or another, we all aspire to a better quality of life. But it is telling that, in his Fabian speech, Brown defined a 'better life' almost exclusively in terms of material wealth and consumption. Defining a 'fair society' as one which enables people to 'own a bigger house' or 'buy a new car', he said precious little about sustainability, about the environment or about protecting our natural heritage. Not a thing, either, about well-being – nothing that seemed to question the role of aspirational consumerism as the only route to genuinely enrich our

lives. The implication was that the voters must let Brown and his government stay in power and work on getting the economy back to normal – back to ‘business as usual’ – so that we can get on with buying more televisions and securing mortgages that we can’t afford, because that is the best way to make us – and the economy – happy.

Perhaps this is unsurprising from a government whose best brains in the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit in 2007 declared – apparently with satisfaction – that ‘the UK is now a consumer society’. Indeed, we are more than a consumer society: in the words of Neal Lawson, over the past three decades we’ve changed from consumers to ‘turbo-consumers’, expecting instant gratification and increasingly defining ourselves by what we consume.

But while this approach may not be surprising, it is both politically short-sighted and deeply irresponsible. It is precisely business as usual, based on credit-fuelled consumerism, which led to the recent economic collapse. Uniquely, the current recession has its origins not in external shock, such as war or rocketing oil prices, but in over-consumption and greed. Moreover, if a ‘fair’ society is defined solely in terms of everyone acquiring ever more material ‘stuff’, it’s hard to see how economic stability, environmental sustainability or social justice can ever be seriously be achieved.

This poses what is arguably the most important question facing political leaders today: how can we reduce our environmental impact while at the same time promoting equity and improving our quality of life?

Many would argue that we can’t: that since, in their view, green policies are intrinsically regressive, the choice is simply between tackling the environment or tackling inequality. Indeed, the Greens have long been accused of appealing only to the better-off, and of having nothing to say to low-income families on inner city estates.

My argument is the opposite: that the sustainability agenda and the equalities agenda are one and the same; that redistribution is at the heart of the Green approach, and that it is indeed possible for us to flourish, and at the same time for the more well off among us to

consume less. And not only is it possible, it is essential; as Tim Jackson eloquently puts it: ‘For the advanced economies of the Western world, prosperity without growth is no longer a utopian dream. It is a financial and ecological necessity.’¹

Rethinking economy and society

Far from advocating as swift as possible a return to business as usual, then, we should be using the economic crisis as a vital opportunity to rethink what we want from our economy and society, to reconsider what we mean by a ‘fair’ society, and to challenge those who would simply like to pick up where we were before the system crashed. This is something that is beginning to be recognised by others, including some in the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats, even if their party programmes need to do so much more to give practical policy expression to that belief.

Fortunately, there is increasing evidence to suggest that, after essential needs are met, happiness and well-being do not depend on endless economic growth and material wealth, but rather on contented families, strong communities, meaningful work and personal freedom. So it becomes clearer that the policies we need to live good lives are precisely the policies we need to tackle the socio-economic and environmental challenges we face today.

Indeed, according to the economist Herman Daly, so-called ‘economic growth’ has already become uneconomic: the quantitative increase in the economic system increases social and environmental costs more quickly than it produces benefits, making us poorer, not richer, at least in many ‘developed’ countries.² In the last quarter of a century, the global economy has doubled, while an estimated 60 per cent of the world’s ecosystems have been degraded. Global carbon emissions have risen by 40 per cent since 1990, while significant scarcity in key resources is a growing threat.

According to conventional wisdom, economic growth is supposed to deliver universal prosperity. Higher incomes should

mean richer lives and an improved quality of life for all of us. But we have seen that the reality is rather different. Growth has delivered its benefits at best unequally.³ A fifth of the world's population earns just 2 per cent of global income. Inequality is higher in the OECD nations than it was twenty years ago. In the UK, it is higher now than it was when Labour came to power in 1997.

So, far from raising the living standard for those who most needed it, growth has let much of the world's population down. Fairness (or the lack of it) is just one of many reasons to question the conventional formula for achieving prosperity. And while some of us may have become relatively wealthier, levels of equality, well-being and happiness have not increased.

Urgent change is clearly needed, yet our addiction to consumerism leads many to believe that we have already lost the battle. As well as leading most of us into an ostrich-like denial of its implications, the strength of the consumerist ethos has reduced governments to a state of paralysis, too nervous of public opinion to implement any policy capable of making a real difference. But a recent groundbreaking work by two British authors could hold the key to addressing this challenge. It proposes that what actually lies at the heart of the need to endlessly consume is inequality.

In *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that the key to reducing the cultural pressure to consume is greater equality. They set out how greater equality makes growth much less necessary. A great deal of what drives consumption is status competition, so that inequality ratchets up the competitive pressure to consume. This would explain, for example, why more unequal countries spend a higher proportion of their GDP on advertising, with the US and New Zealand spending twice as much as Norway and Denmark.

The authors cite many examples to underline their case, one of the most persuasive based on a simple test. People were asked to say whether they'd prefer to be less well-off than others in a rich society, or have a much lower income in a poorer country but be better-off

than others. Fully 50 per cent of participants thought they would trade as much as half of their real income if they could live in a society in which they would be better off than others – powerful evidence of how much we value status, and a clear demonstration of the fact that income differences *within* rich societies matter to individuals so much more than the income differences *between* them.

The crucial point here is that, once we have the necessities of life it is the relativities that matter. Consumerism is largely driven by emulation, and status competition about social appearance and position explains why we continue to pursue economic growth despite its apparent lack of benefits. It follows that if we pursue policies to reduce inequality and ensure that society's basic needs are met, it will also have a positive effect on our environmental impact as we curb unsustainable turbo-consumerism.

There is much talk today of costs and sacrifice, of a need to give up our cherished consumer indulgences in response to global environmental crises. Yet this is to misunderstand the challenge, and to ignore the opportunity. Since, as we've seen, individual and general well-being aren't well served by the resource-hungry path we've chosen, facing up to the current global challenges could propel us towards more fulfilling ways of living. Indeed, tackling environmental problems gives us an extraordinary chance to pause and rethink the way we live.

If the key question we face is how to reduce our carbon footprint while simultaneously promoting equity and improving our quality of life, then lifestyle and behaviour change will have a key role to play – but only as part of a fundamental restructuring of our economy, society and culture. Simplistic exhortations for people to resist consumerism will fail. Urging people to make lifestyle changes (driving less, walking more, buying locally, turning down the thermostat) when they fly in the face of the structures and values that dominate society and our economy is simply unrealistic. Lifestyle change isn't an alternative to government action, it's a necessary complement to it.

A programme for change

Structural change at the highest level is therefore essential; first, to dismantle the perverse incentives for unproductive status competition; and, second, to establish new structures that provide the potential for people to flourish, and to participate meaningfully and creatively in the life of society. We need a more stable, resilient and accountable financial system, more efficient and innovative industry, new Green jobs, and a fairer society. We need practical policies to promote equality, provide warm homes for those living in fuel poverty, and protect the environment.

This is where the Green New Deal comes in, based on massive investment in energy efficiency and renewable energies, offering an historic opportunity to tackle both the climate crisis and the economic crisis at the same time, creating millions of Green jobs, and kick-starting the urgently needed transformation to a post-carbon economy.

This needs to be combined with the mainstreaming of alternative economic indicators, such as national well-being accounts, together with new regulation, alongside financial incentives for greener production and consumption.

Central to this new policy programme are proposals for a fairer tax system. Over recent months, the bank-induced credit crunch has transformed into a debate about public service cuts. Yet not only is making cuts in spending in the midst of a recession a bad idea economically; any 'gap' can be much more sensibly financed through tax reform that makes the current system fairer. For it is the public who have had to bail out the bankers – whose flawed systems have led to this crisis – and it is those least able to afford it who are being forced to pay the highest price, by having their pay frozen and vital services cut.

Instead of trying to compete with one another over the savagery of proposals to slash public spending, politicians should be using this as a chance to put right our regressive tax system, to create one that is more equitable. A 50 per cent income tax band for gross

incomes above £100,000, abolishing the upper limit for National Insurance contributions, introducing a living wage not just a minimum wage, and reintroducing the 10p tax band to stop those working on lower incomes from slipping further into poverty would all be crucial.

Introducing a High Pay Commission to make recommendations about maximum income levels, clamping down on tax avoidance, and fair policies to cut emissions through a system of individual carbon allowances, are all part of a more progressive way forward. An additional part of this agenda to create a fairer economy is a proposed tax on land values, to dampen house-price speculation and at the same time to provide funds for social housing, free social care to the elderly and an increase in the single person's state pension to £165 per week to help our older people live better lives.

Furthermore, in order to achieve a better quality of life for all, inequality between men and women can be targeted through policies to share the available work more equally – for example, with a 35 hour week and equal parental rights – and through increased representation of women in politics and boardrooms via quotas.

An ambitious programme? Certainly. But as anger at the scale and impact of the economic crisis increases, alongside the evidence of a growing environmental crisis, the unique opportunity to build greater momentum towards a fairer, more sustainable society becomes ever clearer.

Caroline Lucas is Leader of the Green Party and MEP for the South East Region.

Notes

1. Sustainable Development Commission, *Prosperity without Growth*, London 2009
2. Herman Daly, *Steady State Economics*, Sustainable Development Commission, London 2009. 3. Sustainable Development Commission, *Prosperity without Growth*, London 2009

Living without growth

Jonathon Porritt

The left must recognise that growth is incompatible with sustainability

Though the prospect of another Conservative government is a disturbing one, it would appear to be better than any of the alternatives currently on offer. Either a hung Parliament, or even a small majority for Labour, would be disastrous. Both would permit the perpetuation of a political economy that has held sway since 1982, first ushered in through the cauterizing radicalism of Mrs Thatcher, and then sustained since 1997 by the deep and devastating deceit that has been 'New Labour'. Both would delay the emergence of any genuinely different political paradigm and condemn 'the progressive left' (whatever that may be) to another few years of strangled posturing.

From that perspective, the best possible outcome for the 2010 general election would be a landslide victory for David Cameron, ensuring that today's hollowed-out and intellectually bankrupt Labour Party would be definitively put out of its misery. As far as the Lib Dems are concerned, the contradictions that have dogged the party for so long (on defence and the nuclear deterrent, on free trade, on radical localism and on economic growth) are even more apparent under Nick Clegg's leadership than they were before.

There was a time when the Lib Dems were as outspoken on the need to rethink our mindless commitment to 'growth at all costs' as anyone else. But not today. One can still detect subtle, coded references to some of the problems associated with the pursuit of economic growth (particularly in Chris Huhne's more nuanced

economic thinking), but the proposition that a single member of the general public would associate the Lib Dems with the need to develop urgent alternatives to unsustainable economic growth is patently absurd.

Most Lib Dems know only too well that the notion of ‘sustainable wealth creation’ will remain a worthless platitude until serious political muscle is exerted to challenge that paradigm. But they self-censor with impressive discipline, so as not to upset the ‘GDP fetishists’ (as President Sarkozy has described them! – see below) in the political establishment and mainstream media.

In that regard, it doesn’t really matter who wins the next battle within this strictly circumscribed political space. If the imperatives that define that space (growth good: more growth necessarily better; profits good: profit maximisation better; trade good: unfettered global trade better; taxation bad: high taxes terrible – and so on) remain unchallenged, then we’re basically stuck with an eco-cidal business-as-usual model of progress. That model might be managed in less damaging ways if the Lib Dems were sharing power with Labour, but it really wouldn’t make much difference.

People like myself (a member of the Green Party since the mid-1970s and a strong supporter of various Red/Green initiatives and progressive coalitions over the last thirty-five years) derive no joy from that kind of analysis. A landslide for the Tories would mean that progress on critical aspects of the green agenda will be seriously set back. Although I think David Cameron himself and his closest advisors are as committed to addressing the challenge of accelerating climate change as anyone in the Labour Party, his room for manoeuvre will be severely restricted – both by a largely unreconstructed Conservative Party at the local level, and by his incomprehensible choice of political allies in Europe – for most of whom climate change remains an irrelevance at best and an outright hoax at worst.

Just as worrying are Cameron’s regressive tax plans, where the combination of higher thresholds for inheritance tax, the

elimination of the new 50p tax band, the removal of the cap on tax relief for top pensions, the introduction of a marriage allowance that will be of much greater benefit to the rich than the poor, as well as the possibility of a cut in corporation tax, has made it all too clear where his priorities lie in terms of addressing the fact that the UK today remains one of the most inequitable countries in the world. Combined with the inevitability of ‘savage cuts’ in public expenditure, it looks as if there will be little to relieve the gloom over the next few years.

Other than the prospect of a profound re-alignment in British politics. One might suppose that 18 years of neoliberal fundamentalism under Thatcher and Major, plus a further 13 look-alike years under Blair and Brown, would of itself provide more than enough justification for such a realignment. But experience tells us that there are still many in the Labour Party who will continue to opt for their own equivalent of Monty Python’s ‘Dead Parrot’ sketch: ‘This Party’s not dead; it’s just resting’. Electoral meltdown is still required to provide the last rites.

The contours of that realignment have been comprehensively mapped out in this collection of essays, with three overlapping crises clamouring to be addressed without further delay: the crisis caused by profound and persistent inequity; the crisis caused by biophysical unsustainability, and in particular by accelerating climate change; and the crisis caused by the systemic dysfunctionalities in our democracy. Though I have no doubt that the major parties will all, in varying degrees, offer electors ‘solutions’ to these overlapping crises in the general election, there is as yet little to indicate that any of their prescriptions will differ in any significant way from what they’ve offered over the last decade.

Climate change may provide the exception to that generalisation. Since the last general election, all the major parties have substantially raised their game on climate policy. The protracted debate around the 2008 Climate Change Act required them all to stop talking about climate change ‘as an environmental

issue’, and to start scoping out the full implications of what it would mean for the economy to achieve the kind of targets that they’ve now all signed up to under the Act: a cut of at least 34 per cent by 2020 and of at least 80 per cent by 2050.

But that scoping still remains frighteningly superficial, with zero appetite in any of the parties for appraising the compatibility between that kind of ‘radical decarbonisation’ and the continuing pursuit of year-on-year increases in conventional economic growth. The reason for this is that the vast majority of people still want all the benefits of today’s economic growth but without the externalities in terms of the emissions of greenhouse gases. So the solution, we are told, is to ‘decouple’ the desirable objective of economic growth from the undesirable consequence of emissions through huge improvements in resource efficiency and CO₂ intensity – the amount of CO₂ emitted for each unit of GDP. Both Labour Ministers and leading Tories are becoming increasingly upbeat about the potential in this: ‘high growth, low emissions’ is how they capture the challenge. And that’s basically what the failed Copenhagen process at the end of 2009 was all about: how best to continue to improve people’s lives through rising levels of economic growth without the civilisation-threatening build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere?

One aspect of this particular ‘framing’ of climate change is certainly true: we do indeed need full-on decoupling. Urgently. In every sector of the economy, in every country. Politicians have been talking about it for a very long time, but there’s still relatively little going on to deliver it.

Indeed, people still have no idea about the scale of what is being proposed in terms of this decoupling challenge. In his new book *Prosperity without Growth*, Tim Jackson explains what that 80 per cent target means in terms of CO₂e/\$ – looking at the whole basket of greenhouse gases emitted for every dollar of economic output. Right now, with regard to the global economy as a whole, we emit 768g of CO₂e for every dollar. To achieve an 80 per cent reduction, all other

things being equal, we would need to get that down to 36g by 2050. If we wanted everyone in the world to be able to enjoy the same kind of standard of living as we do in the OECD today, we would need to get down to 14g. And if we ourselves are hoping that our already wealthy economies can continue to grow (at roughly 2% per annum over the next forty years), then the CO₂ intensity target comes down to an eye-watering 6g. From 768g CO₂e/\$ to 6g CO₂e/\$. That's the harsh reality of the ever-so-reassuring notion of decoupling.

My conclusion arising from this is a simple one: year-on-year increases in consumption-driven conventional economic growth, for more and more people, indefinitely into the future, is simply not compatible with the idea of a sustainable, ultra-low carbon economy. And that means we're going to have to fundamentally rethink the conventional growth model on which the global economy is currently based.

A question for the left

So here's the question to which I wish to address my remaining comments: by how many on the progressive left is that analysis shared? How many are still in thrall to the ideology of growthism in the same way that the major parties are?

One of the most important reasons for urging the outright demolition of New Labour is that it has chosen totally to ignore this challenge to today's dominant model of progress. As Chair of the Sustainable Development Commission, I met with nothing but indifference or outright hostility over ten years to our 'Redefining Prosperity' workstream. The launch of our *Prosperity without Growth?* report (the precursor to Tim Jackson's book of the same title – but without the question mark!) in the run-up to the G20 Summit in 2009 reduced Treasury officials and advisors in Number 10 to apoplectic incredulity. 'Do you really not see that getting back to as high a level of economic growth as possible, just as fast as possible, is *all* that matters to this government?'

Given the depth of the 2009 recession, that may seem reasonable. But ministers were no less indifferent/hostile when the economy was ‘booming’. Questioning the wisdom of conventional economic growth has simply been off limits, as it has been for the last twenty-five years, since the debate around the publication of the Club of Rome’s ‘Limits to Growth’ in 1972 petered out in the mid-1980s. The combination of craven intellectual dishonesty (any fool can see that persisting with Earth-trashing, consumption-driven economic growth as the *sole* model of progress for humankind for 7 (or even 9) billion people, indefinitely into the future, is simply insane), and a dogged ideological commitment to economic growth as the principal means of addressing poverty and injustice, is a lethal one.

President Sarkozy put his finger on it in launching the 2009 report authored for him by Amartya Sen and Joseph Stiglitz (*The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*) in describing this phenomenon as ‘GDP fetishism’.

Hence my nervousness in exhorting today’s progressive left ‘to re-engage’ with its intellectual and philosophical traditions. The history of the Labour Party (both Old and New) is inextricably entangled with the history of industrialism itself, where both power and progress resided first in increased production and latterly in increased consumption. That growth-obsessed ‘genetic inheritance’ still shapes much of today’s so-called ‘progressive’ thinking on the left, and no amount of empirical evidence as to *the inherent impossibility* of continuing with this cornucopian model of progress appears to make much difference.

For both Labour and the Lib Dems, this is therefore hard graft.

One of the putative benefits of year-on-year economic growth in the rich world has been the promise that with the economic ‘pie’ getting bigger and bigger all the time, there will be more every year not just for the already well-off but for the poor – through increased job opportunities (generated by general increases in wealth and higher levels of consumption), improved public services, and (as the last resort) improved welfare safety nets.

And that has sort of worked – at least in those countries that believe that disparities in wealth should be actively managed to limit social injustice. In such countries, redistribution is not a dirty word. In countries that don't believe this (including the UK), year-on-year increases in economic growth have done much less to improve the lot of the poor. Social injustice and lack of social mobility remain grave and persistent problems. With much lower levels of economic growth, those equity issues will become even starker – and the need for unambiguously redistributive interventions (through fiscal and public expenditure policies) even more persuasive.

And that of course is the *real* challenge of climate change. As we saw in the disastrous Copenhagen Conference at the end of 2009, there will be *no* lasting agreement on reducing emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases that isn't based on a far more equitable distribution of global wealth. With countries like China, India, Brazil and Indonesia calling for more of the shots, it's slowly dawning on OECD politicians that banging on about burden-sharing, technology transfer and compensatory funding mechanisms (even to the tune of the \$100 billion a year suggested by Gordon Brown) isn't going to cut it.

If one thinks more holistically about climate change in terms of 'the global commons' that are affected by it (the 'commons' in question being the physical capacity of different ecosystems – atmospheric, terrestrial, marine – to absorb the greenhouse gases we emit), then the real question is devastatingly simple: on what basis should access to this all-important global commons be allocated in future? With the same per capita allocations 'locked-in' indefinitely ('grand-fathered', as some describe it), with US citizens laying claim to some God-given right to go on emitting at current levels of around 20 tonnes of CO₂ a year, whilst the 1.2 billion citizens of India remain stuck on little more than 1 tonne per person? This hardly seems viable, let alone morally justifiable.

The alternative, of course, is to allocate access to that global commons on a strictly equal per capita basis, with each citizen of

Planet Earth entitled to exactly the same ‘share of resource’, as a simple matter of natural justice. Ultimately, a sustainable world depends on countries converging as rapidly as possible around the fairest allocation of the total resource available – as in total volumes of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases that can ‘safely’ be emitted into the atmosphere.

China’s uncompromising negotiating stance in Copenhagen tells us it will be the latter, *whether we like it or not*. Which means, paradoxically, that climate change may just become the means by which global wealth is redistributed (via ‘fair shares in carbon’) more effectively than any other means in the past.

The ‘equity dimension’ of sustainable development (so eloquently advocated in the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* back in 1987) must now command as much attention as the ‘biophysical limits’ dimension. If there is such a phenomenon as the ‘progressive left’, it should now be able to coalesce around those twin imperatives – assuming only that it is possible to jettison the ‘growth-at-all-costs’ baggage that has dominated our lives for the last fifty years or so, and to re-align our model of progress with the non-negotiable physical realities that confront our species at this point in its evolution.

That’s a very big assumption. Progressive thinkers on the left, in the Lib Dems and amongst the Trade Unions have until now been as resistant to such a re-alignment as Gordon Brown’s apparatchiks in Number 10. Until recently, ‘make do and mend’ mindsets have persuaded the majority of progressive activists that it is not the model of progress itself that is the problem, but simply the way it is being interpreted and implemented.

And that’s not so surprising. If one skims over some of the key elements in any contrast of different models, it rapidly becomes clear just how profound a philosophical transformation would be required: moving away from debt-driven economic growth to needs-based economic development; from conspicuous consumption to material modesty; from fetishising GDP to a

consistent focus on well-being and flourishing; from near-total dependency on fossil fuels to near-total reliance on solar technologies; from continuing denial of any physical limits (regarding either population growth or growth in the economy) to a society that works within and celebrates those limits; from metaphors of domination and mastery over the Earth to an ethic of stewardship and the practice of co-habitation.

That kind of transformation is precisely what today's politicians have been so keen to avoid any discussion of. Which is why it's still much more convenient for them to frame climate change either as an 'environmental issue' or as a 'resource efficiency challenge', both of which can be 'managed' without needing to ask citizens to rethink their entire lives.

This mis-framing has been painfully demonstrated in the government's latest 'Act on CO₂' campaign. Shock-horror tactics are very much part of the deal. The latest TV advert features Dad reading a bedtime story to daughter. The story is all about climate change, and the terrible things that are about to happen to us as temperatures soar and sea levels rise. As her teddy bear sinks beneath an all-engulfing tidal wave, her eyes widen with fear: 'Does this story have a happy ending, Daddy?' 'That depends on us'; we are told.

Like hell it does! *Of course* we can all do our bit, and it's really important that more and more of us do. And that this bit should get bigger and bigger. But only governments can regulate markets and re-frame today's macro-economic model to ensure sustainable, ultra-low-carbon outcomes from that economy. You can't dump responsibility for transforming the entire global economy on the shoulders of a six-year old child who's just lost her teddy bear.

People intuitively know that this just doesn't add up. If things were that bad, wouldn't the government be demonstrating some kind of consistency in the portfolio of its policies instead of pushing ahead with plans for another runway at Heathrow, new coal-fired power stations, and the widening of already congested motorways?

Understandably, they smell a rat. It goes under the name of ‘systemic cognitive dissonance’.

Post-election, it will be possible to measure the gap between the mainstream parties’ manifestoes and what we now know needs to happen – on both climate change and equity. For instance, given that David Cameron and George Osborne are clearly comfortable with prioritising their electoral appeal to the rich elite (as already revealed in their fiscal policies), how brave will Labour be in *explicitly* committing itself to a far more profound redistribution in wealth than it has felt able to do since 1997?

Not very, I fear. Labour advisers continue to live in dread of the UK’s predominantly right-wing media. The early endorsement of the Conservatives by the *Sun* will not help in that regard. And one wonders, anyway, how Labour candidates will explain, without collapsing under the weight of their own hypocrisy, that at the end of their 13 years in office there are now more people living in fuel poverty than there were in 1997, that the poor have ended up paying, on average, around 45% of their income in tax, whilst the richest pay only 35%, that the salaries of business leaders have risen from 40 times the wage of an average worker to 80 times, and that 20% of the population is still stuck in miserable poverty? The Fabian Society’s report in November last year, *The Solidarity Society*, threw down the equity gauntlet in uncompromising terms:

Inequality in Britain today, on some measures, is at its highest since the earlier 1960s. We could be at a tipping point that sends Britain back towards Victorian levels of inequality and social segregation, and makes the solidarity which would challenge that social segregation even more difficult to recover.

But the case for a fairer society, so powerfully articulated in Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s *The Spirit Level* (one of the most important books to have emerged over the last few years) may even now struggle to be heard – even against a backdrop of economic

recession driven by greed, massive mismanagement of the economy, and ‘socially useless’ financial speculation. In other words, the gap between what is needed (on equity, sustainability and the integrity of our governance systems) and what is on offer from the mainstream parties is likely to be even wider after the election than it is now. By the same token, the opportunity to start building a new movement for change will never be greater.

But that won’t happen unless the very idea of the ‘progressive left’ in the UK is stripped of its historical cornucopian fantasies, and in the process rendered genuinely ‘fit for purpose’ against the backdrop of accelerating climate change, imminent resource shortages and collapsing ecosystems. That’s going to be a tough call for those whose default reaction over the last couple of decades has been to dismiss such concerns as ‘illiberal, neo-Malthusian scare-mongering’.

Jonathon Porritt is Founder Director of Forum for the Future. His latest publication, *Living Within Our Means* (2009), is available at www.forumforthefuture.org.

Making hope practical

Leanne Wood

Building new coalitions and networks for change
is our only hope in meeting the challenges we
currently face

Our world is facing one of the greatest sets of challenges in living memory. Capitalism was very nearly brought to its knees during the latter half of 2008, with once impregnable financial institutions falling like dominoes. Only a bail-out of unprecedented proportions staved off a complete collapse of the financial system. We don't know whether the recently reported upturn in economic activity marks the beginning of the recovery or is a temporary blip in an otherwise downward spiral. What is certain is that there are no reserves available to avert a financial meltdown should the same precarious situation manifest itself again. The National Audit Office estimated that the bill for the bank bail-out in Britain has reached a staggering £850 billion and is set to rise over the coming years.¹ The cost of the debt will have a devastating effect on public services, and will, no doubt, be felt for many years to come.

In what is in part an attempt to convert the rest of the world to an economic system of unfettered capitalism, as well as to secure its own unfettered access to oil, the United Kingdom government remains committed to supporting its US allies in a bloody and expensive imperialist war in Afghanistan that appears to lack any clear aim or exit strategy. The only guarantee from the fierce fighting in Helmand Province is for more casualties – among civilians as well as working-class soldiers. At a time of financial austerity, the UK government can no longer afford such foreign

adventures. Last year it was officially disclosed that the cost of sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan had soared to £4.5 billion per year.² It emerged towards the end of 2009 that the UK government has been forced for the first time in modern history into raiding the budget of the Ministry of Defence to fund a continuing military operation. These wars have also had a huge impact on community cohesion, and have threatened multiracialism. As the death toll rises, fuel is provided for the fires of the far right. They may be sworn enemies, but BNP leader Nick Griffin and the controversial Muslim cleric Anjem Choudary are using and profiting from the bloodshed in the Middle East. The economic situation, and a tabloid propaganda campaign that demonises all Muslims and immigrants and defines 'Britishness' in ethnic terms, helped the BNP to win two seats in the north of England in the 2009 Euro-elections, and a 6.2 per cent share of the total UK vote (with 5.4 per cent in Wales and 2.9 per cent in Scotland). That year also saw the English Defence League spring up from nowhere.

We face further strife as our 200-year-old addiction to fossil fuels takes its toll. The majority of scientific opinion is in agreement that man-made climate change will soon start to produce catastrophic effects unless we move quickly towards a low-carbon economy. Coupled with predictions of peak oil, the world in twenty years time will certainly be very different to the one we live in now. As food and water become more difficult to get hold of the world over, competition for resources will lead to mass movements of people, as well as more conflict and war.

The failure to achieve any legally binding agreement on cutting greenhouse gas emissions at the recent UN talks in Copenhagen, while a small club of powerful nations ensured the protection of their own interests, has led Bolivia's Evo Morales to call an alternative climate summit, inviting those activists, scientists and government officials 'who want to work with the people'. Morales wants to put pressure on rich nations to accept the fact that they

owe a climate debt to the poor nations of the world, and to create an international court for environmental crimes, as well as a legally binding ‘universal proposal for the rights of mother earth’: ‘In the past century our black and indigenous ancestors were treated as slaves, and their rights were not recognized. In a similar way, now our Mother Earth is being treated as a lifeless object, as if she had no rights. We have to abolish the slavery of Mother Earth. It is unacceptable for her to be the slave of capitalist countries. If we don’t end this, we can forget about life.’³

For the last two hundred years, economic growth has developed in tandem with fossil fuel usage. The global rich are rich because, through imperialism, they plundered and exploited the earth’s natural and human resources. People and nature in countries ‘owned’ by Britain could be taken and used at no cost. The wealth of the richest countries has grown because of the use of these resources, chiefly, more recently, fossil fuels.⁴ Some scientists predict that oil will reach its peak within the decade.⁵ If these predictions are realised, fuel prices will rocket. The former head of the English Countryside Agency, Lord Cameron of Dillington, predicted that we are only ‘nine meals from anarchy’.⁶ If oil supplies were to be suddenly shut down, he estimated it would only take just three days of empty supermarket shelves before law and order broke down and the streets descended into chaos. In 1995, 27 per cent of UK food was imported yet, in the 11 years that followed, it went up to 37 per cent.⁷ We are ill-prepared for inflated oil prices and the inevitable food price hike which would follow, partly due to our increasing reliance on imports. The recently unveiled twenty-year food strategy by the UK government is at last a recognition that we face food security problems but, coming just months before an election defeat, it’s likely to be one of many policies and projects jettisoned by the Tories, who are intent on a slash and burn approach to public finances.

It’s easy to despair when faced with such enormous problems. The far right are gaining support on the back of simplistic but

popular solutions, conflict over fossil fuels looks set to continue, and the UK's big three political parties compete with each other over who can slash public expenditure the most. Welsh socialist Raymond Williams was right when he said that it was the duty of the left to be 'making hope practical rather than despair convincing'.⁸ Can leaders like Evo Morales offer hope that the root cause of all of these crises – capitalism itself – can be replaced by something else?

Organising for change

Although not challenging the root cause of the economic crisis, some hope can be found in the words of establishment figures such as Adair Turner. Turner, who is the head of the Financial Services Authority, has described many of the activities on the square mile as 'socially useless'. He has also challenged the cuts orthodoxy, arguing that there should be a tax and spend programme to green the economy and create jobs, and that tax rises should be 'skewed as much as possible to things that make sense in the long-term'. He has also argued that the government should take a direct role in investing in the low-carbon and energy-saving technologies of tomorrow, because the market cannot be relied upon to do so. It makes sense to tackle the economic crisis and the environmental/energy crisis at the same time. While Green New Deals have been talked about in countries all over the world, 'nowhere has a major power re-engineered its economy on the scale needed to face the challenges of climate change and peak oil'.⁹

While the centre is aligned on cuts, there must be a voice from the left demanding investment for workforce training, and support to build and establish a green manufacturing capacity. UK government proposals for offshore wind farms and marine energy from the Severn have the potential to create tens of thousands of jobs. Yet as things stand, turbines will be manufactured in Denmark – the UK's only wind turbine factory, Vestas on the Isle of Wight, stopped production in 2009.

Wales has been hard hit by the economic crisis, with the unemployment rate reaching 8.8 per cent, as against the UK's average of 7.9 per cent.¹⁰ People in some areas – including the valleys where I live – have still not fully recovered from Thatcher's economic assault in the 1980s. Wind turbine factories in Welsh Assembly Government and EU-recognised high-poverty areas would be welcomed with open arms. Ideally, they would be run on a co-operative basis by the community, so that the debacle surrounding the closure of the Vestas factory is not revisited.

There are plenty of examples of local good practice. In many areas local councils are among the largest employers, if not the largest, and control all building development. Woking Borough Council, a local authority in Surrey, has shown what can be done with political will. Woking obtained one of the UK's first sustainable energy 200kWh fuel cells to support the heating and power system of their pool in the park. They also have a sustainable energy station supplying power, heating and cooling to the civic offices and other buildings in the town centre. John Thorp, the group managing director of Thameswey Limited – the Council's energy services company – said their combined heat and power station has proved to be more than twice as efficient as large-scale operations. 'If you take power from the National Grid it is 35 per cent efficient', he said. 'But if you generate heat and power close to its point of demand, it is between 85 per cent and 90 per cent efficient. Most power stations are not set up to capture "waste" heat. With combined heat and power stations you capture the "waste" heat and you sell it.'

The Transition Town movement is another fantastic example of what can be done. With the aim of building community resilience to the two-pronged threat of peak oil and climate change, the movement has gained popularity over the last few years by engaging people in thinking about the changes needed now to stave off a bleak future. The eventual aim of the participating towns is to draw up a 'community defined, community implemented "Energy

Descent Action Plan” over a 15 to 20 year timescale’. Based on Schumacher’s ‘small is beautiful’ economic model, transition towns promote the building of strong local economies that link people, land and the community.

Food co-operatives and growing schemes as well as renewable energy projects are the trademarks of the Transition Towns movement. Environmental awareness, coupled with fears about chemicals and future food shortages, has led to a remarkable rise in the demand for growing space and allotments, with many people having to wait years before they can get a plot. Land is expensive, but an initiative which would free up land for cultivation could provide a wide range of benefits. It could help with food security by reducing our reliance on food imports; and surplus produce could be pooled and sent to local farmers or community food co-op markets for sale locally, thereby reducing fossil-fuel food miles and avoiding a transportation process that also tends to sap taste and nourishment. Local economies could be further boosted if public services such as hospitals, prisons, schools and other institutions were compelled to buy local and organically produced food, which would provide benefit to the environment as well as the local economy.

For such a vision of local, community co-operation to stand a chance of succeeding, the protection of basic public services is a must. Taxpayers’ money must be spent on socially useful projects and services. Benefits, public sector workers’ wages and conditions and many community facilities are under threat because of the budget hole left after the bankers’ bailout. And with a new banking system being built, unregulated, in the image of the old, further financial disaster looms over us. The banking industry is riddled with a culture of high-risk strategies for short-term gain. News that Goldman Sachs plan to issue record bonuses to employees little more than a year after the bank accepted \$10bn in emergency funds from the US treasury shows that lessons have not been learnt. In the UK, the £45bn taxpayer bailed-out RBS is

looking to increase the bonus pool of their investment bank section by 50 per cent to £1.5 billion. Plaid Cymru and Compass have promoted the idea of a ‘People’s Bank’, making credit available to those with accounts, through the linking up of credit unions and post offices as an antidote to the casino capitalism banking that caused the crash. Plans unveiled by the UK government for the post office will not provide such an antidote: the contract has been awarded to the private Bank of Ireland, rather than one of the taxpayer funded banks.

‘In Place of Cuts’, the Compass paper on tax reform, provides a refreshing alternative to the cuts agenda.¹¹ Arguing against the widely accepted orthodoxy that cuts are necessary because of the scale of public debt, the paper outlines how economic recovery can be achieved through fairer taxes and the protection of our public services. There are undoubtedly cuts which could be made. A sharp exit from the Middle East would save billions of pounds as well as countless lives. The two aircraft carriers earmarked for the Royal Navy – HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales – will account for £3.2 billion from the public purse. The cost of replacing Trident, Britain’s so-called nuclear deterrent, could be as much as £97 billion according to Greenpeace. This expenditure has no social usefulness. The ID card scheme, already downgraded from the original plan for compulsory use for all, is another expensive, socially useless plan. If cuts must be made, they have to be to expenditure on schemes like these, if the poorest in society are to avoid bearing the brunt of the inevitable budget reduction programme.

None of these alternatives are on offer from the three main political parties who are in any way likely to form the next UK government, yet there are plenty of people who would be prepared to vote for green/left policies along the lines suggested here.

In Wales there are signs of hope that unity can be built. *Celyn* (Welsh for holly) – a magazine by and for the Welsh green and spiky left – is an example of what can be achieved when tribal differences

are set to one side. Tentative moves are afoot to bring people together under the umbrella of a Welsh arm of a Raymond Williams society. We will need to set aside differences in the near future in order to build a campaign and secure a 'yes' vote on further powers for our weak Assembly – which will be the fulfilment of a commitment by the red/green Welsh Assembly coalition government.

On a UK level the People's Charter provides a set of basic principles around which unity can be built. The six core elements of the charter include building a secure and sustainable future for all, a fairer economy, more and better jobs, and the improvement and protection of our public services. There are promising signs of political collaborations through groups like Compass, the Social Liberal Forum and the 'Back the Left' initiative, as well as people coming together to combat the BNP and the EDL. Although I'm not the greatest fan of the Obama administration so far, now may be the time to take heed of his motto – 'Never waste a good crisis'.

Leanne Wood has been a Plaid Cymru member of the National Assembly for Wales since 2003. She is the party's spokesperson for the Environment and Sustainability. She formerly worked as a probation officer, a Women's Aid support worker and as a university lecturer. Her blog is www.leannewoodamac.blogspot.com.

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Poverty

Richard S. Grayson

Redistribution must be central to our politics

Poverty will continue to be one of the biggest challenges for future British governments. Moreover, a central point of definition of the centre left must be a redistribution of wealth and power in favour of the disadvantaged, and one that should not stop at our own frontiers. The financial crash of 2008 and its wider macroeconomic consequences have given us fewer resources, but its potential impact across the world community makes redistribution an even greater imperative.

The recession came just at the time when within Britain child poverty was beginning to rise again, and when a number of African countries were developing growth rates that might have offered them greater opportunities to tackle poverty themselves. The severity of the recession threatens to intensify existing levels of poverty in the UK, and the recession will also encourage some countries to retreat from their pledges to provide overseas aid. As things stand only one third of the aid pledged by the G8 to Africa by 2010 has been delivered.

As many families try to cope with paying off household debt, the needs of people in communities that lack clean drinking water and have limited access to schooling, in places like Ghana and Zambia, can seem even more remote. So why should reducing poverty within and beyond our borders be a policy objective for the centre left?

We have to begin with our values. A defining feature of both social democracy and social liberalism is to redistribute wealth and opportunity. For both our traditions, poverty is an affront to our

sense of a common humanity, and our belief that all should have the freedom to make the most of their lives. Our sense of shared humanity means that it is unacceptable that some individuals are denied food, shelter, basic comforts or a proper reward for their efforts. Meanwhile, poverty imposes huge limits on freedom – life chances – while the financial distance between the poorest members of our community and the rest of us, is something that strains the core sense of identification that we should have with other human beings. It is this sense of identification that was, ironically, evoked by Adam Smith when he said that the:

disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition ... is ... the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.¹

Whilst Britain has left behind the levels of abject poverty chronicled by people such as Seebohm Rowntree and later George Orwell, the common thread between our situation in the rich world and the context of much of the developing world is the reality of diminished life chances. At the most basic level this means that poor people in both Britain and developing countries have lower life expectancy. In the UK, a study of the cohort born in 1946 showed that men and women from manual social classes in childhood and adulthood were almost three times more likely to die between the ages of 26 and 54 years than those from non-manual classes at these life stages.² In Nigeria life expectancy is 47 years for men.³

This contribution will highlight the key features of poverty in Britain and the reasons it has persisted. It will also demonstrate that there is a wider cost to the rest of the community incurred by persistent and structural poverty. It will also outline a policy prospectus that the centre left could enact within the circumscribed financial context in the next ten years. Finally, it will highlight two major dynamics that contribute to poverty in sub-Saharan Africa,

and argue that aid in the near term, and a move towards international financial transparency, can provide the resources for these economies to pay for their own development.

Poverty in Britain

In the early 1960s child poverty was low. After 1999 child poverty fell, in large part due to the Blair government's initiatives, with 600,000 children being taken out of poverty, but in 2004-5 child poverty began to increase again.⁴

It is important to describe concretely what we mean when we talk about child poverty. What it means in practical terms is that the poorest fifth of children don't have enough bedrooms for every child, they don't have facilities to play safely and they can't replace broken electrical goods. Children from poor homes also cannot go on some of the more expensive school trips, and miss out on paid-for after school activities such as sports, drama and music groups. This latter feature of child poverty not only means that poor British children are prevented from fully participating in activities with their peers, but that they miss yet more opportunities to develop their skills.

The stubbornness of British poverty levels is in part due to its intergenerational character, where children born to parents with low incomes and limited opportunities, in turn experience these disadvantages. As early as the 1960s the Plowden report identified the link between parental education and the attainment of children.⁵ Evidence from birth cohort studies shows that children who scored highly on tests aged 22 months but were from low socioeconomic groups were overtaken by children from high socioeconomic groups in tests when they reach primary school.⁶

The impact of child poverty in Britain is profound and its effects are long lasting. Children from poor homes are more likely to suffer poor health and are less likely to do well at school. The health penalties of poverty start before birth. Poor children are

more likely to have low birth weight, which is associated with health risks throughout life. Other illnesses associated with poverty include diabetes and respiratory illnesses, the latter of which can be influenced by poor housing. But there are also some surprising features of child poverty: for example, the majority of children living in poverty live in a household where there is at least one adult in work.⁷

There is also evidence that the scale of inequality in modern Britain is associated with even lower academic attainment amongst children who come from working-class backgrounds than is the case for their peers in less unequal countries. Wilkinson and Pickett carried out an international comparison of literacy scores according to the educational background of parents. They found that British children with the least educated parents performed more poorly than Finnish and Belgian children with the same social background. This raises the question of how far we can expect to meet national objectives to raise educational standards whilst we continue to live in such an unequal society.⁸

These inequalities impose a public spending cost for the whole society. The Joseph Rowntree Trust has sought to estimate the total cost incurred by poverty. The Trust took into account the fact that there may actually be an underutilization of resources by poor communities in terms of health expenditure. They estimated that the total annual costs of child poverty amounted to £25 billion a year, which is the equivalent of two per cent of gross domestic product. Their estimates took the lower end of the range of costs.⁹

Poverty overseas

The next government will take power only years away from the Millennium Development Goals deadline. The intention of this deadline was to galvanise governments in the rich North to invest in the aspects of development that are central to millions of people having better lives.

A number of countries are off track in terms of the progress they have made towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals, predominantly those in sub-Saharan Africa. A major factor behind this lack of progress is the fact that millions of African people continue to die of preventable illnesses due to the lack of clean drinking water and because of the weakness in health systems.

Aid will continue to play an important role in developing the infrastructure that can enhance the growth potential of economies in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. For those who doubt the effectiveness of aid, it is worth highlighting that the additional resources that have been released since the G8 Gleneagles commitments in 2005 have resulted in the percentage of Malawians having sustainable access to water increasing from 41 per cent to 76 per cent, and in another low-income country, Namibia, the percentage increase was from 57 per cent to 93 per cent.¹⁰

Whilst in the run-up to the Gleneagles summit much of the focus was understandably on levels of total aid commitments made by the European Union countries and the United States, the key issue that must not be obscured is the composition and focus of this aid. There should be a refocusing and intensification of effort across a series of donors on health systems and water and sanitation.

Africa has 3 per cent of the world's health care workers but 24 per cent of global disease burden.¹¹ We cannot expect to see the big reductions in child and maternal mortality that G8 countries committed to unless there is considerable strengthening in health systems in African countries, including the recruitment and retention of many more qualified health care workers. Only 40 per cent of births in eastern and southern Africa are attended by skilled health care workers.¹² Any centre-left administration should recognise that it has to address the push factors affecting the availability of qualified medical staff in African countries. For many years poor pay and facilities have combined to be strong push factors that encourage qualified staff in countries like South Africa to seek work in Europe and North America. To overcome this,

donors must maintain support for targeted measures to train qualified doctors and nursing staff, and to ensure that their salary levels are sufficiently attractive to discourage them from joining the brain drain of health care workers.

Funding by G8 countries for health systems in Africa actually fell between 2004 and 2007. The reality of many hospitals in a range of African countries is of badly under-staffed hospitals with limited access to facilities and medicines. This is the major reason that Africa is off track in relation to the Millennium Development Goals for reduced maternal mortality, and reducing the under-five death rate by two-thirds.

A major source of disease that inadequate health services have to grapple with is diarrhoeal illnesses. 4,100 children die daily due to diarrhoeal diseases that occur because of the lack of access to clean drinking water. Water investment is crucial for the achievement of wider development outcomes. Access to clean drinking water is important for promoting girls' education, as are decent toilets. For example, in Malawi, there has been a steady increase in girls attending schools where there are private facilities rather than pit latrines or bushes.¹³

Having clean drinking water and access to a safe place to go to the toilet will also prevent a series of diseases. A central need is for rural areas in the developing world to secure access to a clean water supply. Worldwide, only 27 per cent of the rural population have water piped into their homes, and nearly 24 per cent get their water from 'unimproved' sources such as rivers.¹⁴

Investing in low-income countries is not simply a matter of moral imperatives and solidarity with our fellow human beings. It is also an investment in the global economy. If countries like Zambia, Ghana and Kenya moved to middle income status they could increasingly become growth engines in the world economy. Their emerging middle classes and manufacturing would create demand for our goods and services.

The policies

In the harsh financial climate that has now been bequeathed to us by the bankers we are challenged even more to produce policies that will alleviate poverty both at home and abroad.

Decision-makers may be faced with a choice of either focusing on meeting the immediate material needs of families or focusing policy on providing the ladders that will help today's children move out of poverty when they are adults. Public funds should focus on extending opportunities so that we stand a greater chance of breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. That will mean prioritising greater financial support to help lone parents to move into work. The Liberal Democrats' Independent Commission on Social Mobility highlighted that access to childcare for disadvantaged groups is still limited, and this should be the focus of additional investment. In addition to this, in order to break the link between social background and educational outcomes we need to provide additional resources for schools that serve disadvantaged communities, through a pupil premium which targets resources on the poorest students.

The need to raise incomes in poor families cannot be met by taxpayer funds in the next two years, given the tremendous spending squeeze that will take place across government departments. However, given the fact that the majority of poor children in Britain have one parent who works, the national minimum wage must be a policy instrument that we use to help meet the Child Poverty Target. Any immediate move to increase the minimum wage would not be desirable as firms recover from the recession. However, two years after growth has been restored the Low Pay Commission should look to significantly increase the national minimum wage, and in subsequent revisions should take into account the need to move towards the 2020 child poverty target. Finally, proposals to reduce government expenditure must minimize harm to low-income groups. The Treasury should undertake an assessment of how far competing proposals to reduce

public spending would impact on the incomes and prospects of low-income families.

Whilst aid levels need to concentrate on health systems and water and sanitation, Northern governments have it within their power to give poor countries the ability to have a sustainable source of development finance. The key to developing countries having sustainable incomes is for them to marshal more tax revenue than they have traditionally been able to in order to pay for hospitals, schools and clean drinking water. Christian Aid and the Tax Justice Network have published evidence that shows that vast amounts of income generated by multinational companies are moved offshore in order to avoid paying tax in developing countries. The result is that Christian Aid estimates that developing countries lost \$160 billion per year in tax revenue.¹⁵ We need to see a system of country-based reporting of multinational profits that would allow developing country governments to focus their enforcement actions against the global tax avoidance industry. Greater transparency in this area would unlock considerable amounts of money and allow developing countries to ‘exit’ from aid dependency.

Conclusion

Unequal life chances offend the sense of common humanity shared by social democrats and social liberals. They have an impact on the whole of society. Moreover, they are closely identified with tensions between the global north and south, whether manifested in the disagreements over how to combat climate change or at the extremism in the alienation of parts of the Islamic world. A revival of the centre left in Britain and Europe must again put social equality at centre-stage.

Richard Grayson is Head of Politics and Senior Lecturer in British and Irish Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London. He

is also Vice-Chair of the Liberal Democrat Federal Policy Committee, and the party's parliamentary candidate for Hemel Hempstead, where he stood in 2005.

Notes

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Equality and liberty

Steve Webb MP

There is no need to choose between the pursuit of liberty and the pursuit of equality

In previous decades the ‘branding’ of the major political parties seemed pretty straightforward. If you were concerned about fairness and equality you voted Labour. If you were concerned about prosperity and a business-friendly environment you voted Conservative. And if personal freedoms and civil liberties motivated you then you voted Liberal.

The evolution of political parties in the last two decades (and in particular, the creation of ‘new Labour’) has blurred these distinctions. But in fact they were never as clear as they seemed. For example, if you wanted the money to pay for redistributive benefits and quality public services then you needed a prosperous economy. Likewise, if you wanted a healthy and well-educated workforce to enhance your prosperity, decent schools and health care were pretty much essential.

In the case of those who place a high value on freedom, the old assumption might have been that this conflicted with a drive for greater equality. After all, redistribution by its nature interferes with individual freedom, and mandatory taxation to fund universal public services restricts the choice of the individual over how they spend their money. But a full understanding of what a ‘free society’ looks like must recognise that a grossly unequal society (of the sort that we observe in modern Anglo-Saxon economies) can never be truly free. Individuals who cannot participate in society because of their lack of material resources cannot be said to be free, no matter

what their civil or political rights. Whilst individuals may appear to have the same rights, exercising those rights may prove impossible if effective participation in society requires material resources which they do not have.

In this contribution I set out the case that a ‘free’ society must also be a fair society, and make the case to fellow liberals that a ‘full-blooded liberalism’ must imply concern about social injustice and inequality. I also provide some examples from contemporary Liberal Democrat policy-making which apply this principle in practice, and show how the goals of freedom and fairness are so often complementary rather than contradictory.

A free society must be a fair society

It has been argued that, in their purest form, the concepts of freedom and fairness are incompatible. John Stuart Mill expressed the view that ‘the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent “harm to others”’. Taken to its logical conclusion, this would suggest that it is not a valid expression of liberalism, for example, for the state to take a proportion of everyone’s income in taxation, to spend on their behalf on “common goods” such as transport, education, health and welfare.

From the other side, a desire to pursue equality above all would require individual freedoms to be heavily curtailed in order to provide for the common good. But seeking true equality of outcomes has in the past implied a centralised and controlling state, with an attendant suppression of diversity and freedom of expression.

However, no politician today advocates either total freedom for the individual from any outside interference, or total equality of outcome at the expense of individual freedom. The route preferred by social liberals is that of an enabling and decentralised state promoting equal access to society. A social liberal would argue that

both state and market have their part to play, as servants not masters.

Unfettered markets are undesirable because they either produce monopolies that exploit individuals, or they fail to take into account social costs or benefits of particular processes or activities. Left to their own devices, markets will deliver unequal outcomes that are particularly undesirable in areas such as health or education. On the other hand, heavy-handed interventions by an over-mighty state go to the opposite extreme and prevent freedom and diversity from flourishing. Social liberals would argue that the state has a duty to intervene where markets are failing – for example where an individual is disadvantaged through poverty of opportunity or income – but that any interventions must be as local and accountable as possible, and must be aimed at empowering rather than constraining.

An empowering freedom

Liberty is enhanced when members of a society are not left behind. Put simply, if society is unequal, the individual is not free. People cannot achieve all that they are capable of – either academically, socially, in their careers, in the contribution they make to society or in any other area – unless they have the opportunities to do so. This may be through provision of a good education, assistance to retrain if they lose their job, decent healthcare when they fall ill.

One example of a way in which we risk creating new inequalities is through the so-called ‘digital divide’. In principle, enhanced access to information technology, at home, at school or in the workplace, offers huge opportunity and potential. In many ways, it offers a route to ‘liberation’, as information becomes more widely available and is less mediated through third parties with vested interests. However, if these new opportunities are not widely spread we risk creating new divisions in our society, some of which will reinforce existing divisions. In the case of the ‘digital divide’, those

who may miss out – the less educated, the less wealthy, the very elderly – are groups who may already be socially excluded.

If the only consequence of all of this was that these groups missed out on the ‘bonus’ of digital inclusion then this would be bad enough. But if society increasingly regards access to these sources of information as a ‘norm’ and is structured around that assumption, then the digitally excluded will rapidly become socially excluded. A simple example of this is that those who do not receive their utility bills electronically increasingly have to pay a financial penalty for receiving a paper bill. When internet access was for the minority, utilities did not take this step. But now that it has become the ‘norm’ they feel able to penalise those who do not have access with impunity.

Whilst all are in principle ‘free’ to access the internet, free to ‘have their say’ in the online discussions much beloved of political parties and public bodies, our unequal society means that in reality many people are missing out on these freedoms. Liberals may welcome the information age as a route to greater freedom, but we need a more equal society if that freedom is not simply to become the preserve of the advantaged in a way that is not freedom-enhancing for our society as a whole.

Freedom and fairness in current Liberal Democrat policy-making

Fairness is integral to a Liberal Democrat view of a free society. The Preamble to the Liberal Democrats’ Federal Party Constitution places liberty and equality side by side: ‘The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.’

It is not surprising therefore that fairness is a key theme shaping our 2010 election manifesto policies. Major policies include raising the income tax threshold to £10,000, so that the poorest members of society are lifted out of the tax system. The fairness of this proposal is

enhanced by the way in which it is funded. Closing tax loopholes on high earners, ending the preferential treatment of capital gains over income in the tax system, and introducing a new ‘mansion tax’ on the value of homes worth over £2 million. Both the ways in which the money for this policy is raised, and the way in which it is spent, would result in a fairer and, in our view, a freer society.

We also aim to give every child a fair start in life by introducing a ‘pupil premium’, which offers more money to schools according to the number of disadvantaged pupils on their rolls. The idea is that this would allow schools to reduce class sizes, offer more one-to-one tuition to help pupils who are struggling, and recruit more teachers to improve discipline. This will be paid for in part by abolishing tax credits for higher earners. Again, both the way this policy is funded and the way the money is spent combine to reduce inequalities and thereby to increase the freedoms of those who would otherwise be disadvantaged.

Are freedom and fairness really in opposition?

The following are two of many possible examples of ways in which promoting greater freedom will lead to a more just society and of how reducing inequalities will make people more free.

1. How enhanced civil liberties reduce inequality

In the last two decades, and particularly in the years since 9/11, government attempts to make Britain safe from the threat of terrorism have led to measures which have clamped down on the civil liberties of British citizens. To name but a few, more than 3,600 new crimes have been placed on the statute book in the last twelve years; there are more than four million CCTV cameras recording our every move; an intrusive identity cards scheme is being planned; attempts have been made to restrict the right to trial by jury; and restrictions have been placed on the right to public assembly for gatherings of more than two people.

As these new laws work their way into the public consciousness, people are becoming increasingly concerned about what they mean for their own freedoms and those close to them. When ordinary citizens find themselves being stopped for using a camera in a public place, or arrested for attending a peaceful demonstration, people become uncertain about what they can and cannot do. This raises issues not just of liberty but also of equality: a society where citizens worry about what they are permitted to do, say and even think, is not a society where people are confident that a diversity of beliefs is valued or even tolerated. As my colleague, Lib Dem home affairs spokesman Chris Huhne has pointed out, George Orwell's *1984* was intended to be 'a warning, not a blueprint'.¹

In this case, promoting freedom will lead to greater equality. Authoritarian government action has a tendency to reinforce existing disadvantages – witness, for example, the extensive use of 'stop-and-search' powers against young black men, and the disproportionate numbers of DNA samples held on the national DNA database for members of minority ethnic groups. Measures to protect civil liberties – which liberals would regard as being right in and of themselves – are also likely to be foster a more equal society. In short, not only does greater fairness create a more free society, but a society in which civil liberties are valued is likely to be a fairer one as a result.

2. How unfair voting systems silence the voice of the poor

A further key area where the traditional concerns of liberals and those of people fighting injustice come together is in the area of constitutional reform. Far from being an esoteric subject, the issue of how political power is exercised in our country is central to any conception of a fair society.

Present electoral arrangements at UK general elections are hugely detrimental to the interests of the marginalised and the dispossessed in our society. This problem manifests itself most clearly in the case of electoral registration, where there is clear

evidence that disadvantaged groups – the urban poor, low-income young people, those who do not have English as a first language – are less likely even to appear on voting lists. Even where they are registered, these groups are much less likely to vote than the articulate or affluent. But the problem goes much deeper than this. Even if we could ensure full registration among marginal groups, and even if we could effectively encourage them to take part in elections, their voice would still be diminished.

The reason for this is the first-past-the-post voting system. At the 2005 election it took 27,000 votes to elect a Labour MP, 44,000 to elect a Conservative MP, and 96,000 to elect a Liberal Democrat MP. More than 600,000 people would have needed to vote UKIP to elect a single MP.² This is hardly a system where everybody's vote counts equally.

Instead, a large number of first-past-the-post constituencies return a politician of the same party for election after election. Political parties know that political effort in some constituencies will yield them little or no return – either because the seat is 'safe' for them with minimal effort or, conversely, because it would require disproportionate effort to wrest it from its traditional home.

As a result, the parties focus their efforts on the 'swing' seats. On the whole, these tend not to be centres of urban deprivation but rather tend to be in 'middle England'. Worse still, the parties write off the concerns of those who are already definite supporters of their own cause and concentrate on the 'floating voter' whose views are subject to extensive polling and focus group testing. The whole national programme of political parties in such an electoral system is then shaped by the priorities of the floating voter in the marginal seat. It is highly unlikely that these concerns will be those of people on the margins of society. In consequence, parties whose platform prioritises the needs of the poor are likely to struggle electorally. An electoral system that fails the basic tests of democracy undermines the impetus for greater fairness. The concern of liberals for constitutional reform fights back at an electoral system which

reinforces unfairness – political freedom and social justice once again find themselves on the same side of the argument.

Conclusion

Those who value liberty and those who value social justice should recognise that they are friends not foes and have common interests. A society cannot be truly free if it is scarred by inequalities in economic power where people at the bottom of the pile cannot participate. But nor will a society be truly fair if inequalities in political and civil rights mean that the voice of the marginalised and the dispossessed is silenced.

Those who value and pursue social justice need to speak out in support of political and civil equalities and freedoms, both for their own sake, and in order to foster greater social justice. Those who value liberty must speak out in favour of greater economic equality so that liberty is experienced in fact and not just in theory. These two political strands of thought have been allowed to diverge in recent decades. But, faced with a decade of austerity where the poor may find themselves hardest hit by the cold winds of economic retrenchment, the time is right for the two to come together again to argue for a free and fair society.

Steve Webb is Liberal Democrat MP for Northavon, and is the party's Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. Prior to being elected to Parliament in 1997, he worked for nine years as an economist at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, before being appointed Professor of Social Policy at Bath University in 1995.

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Nationalism and the British left: a view from Scotland

Richard Thomson

What happens next in Scotland will have interesting effects on the rest of the UK

Contrary to what some might choose to assert, a Conservative government in London is not a prospect which cheers in the slightest those who, like myself, share an SNP persuasion. Nevertheless, if the voters of the marginal swing seats of the Midlands and the south of England will it to be so, the 2010 UK general election could result in Labour being removed from office in every UK capital except for Cardiff.

Thanks to devolution and nationalist parties in government, for Scotland and Wales the impact of whatever changes occur in the next few months will be politically and constitutionally different from what is experienced in the rest of the UK. This has profound implications for the social democratic left across the UK – in particular for those who, either by inclination or default, support the continuance of the UK as a political entity rather than simply recognise it as a social and economic reality.

The British left has been at best ambivalent, and at worst downright hostile towards any kind of nationalism on the UK mainland other than a default Britishness; it often posits a false dichotomy between nationalism and internationalism, as if the two were in any way incompatible. While nationalism may have been tolerated and even celebrated as a means of undermining colonial rule, the picture of Scotland as an oppressed colony was one which

– quite rightly – would not have been recognised outside the hardest of hard-line nationalist circles. As such, the independence argument always tended to be seen as peripheral, or as an ambition that was somehow unworthy – as something which would dilute the social solidarity of the UK and the broad labour movement.

During the period of the 1979-97 Conservative governments, the argument for devolution which found greatest favour amongst formerly sceptical elements of the Scottish Labour Party was that it would provide a ‘defence mechanism’ against a prime minister hostile to Scottish social and economic preferences. As the late Robin Cook put it in a speech to the Scottish Socialist Society in 1983:

I have not been an extravagant supporter of the Scottish dimension but I have changed my mind. I don’t give a bugger if Margaret Thatcher has a mandate or not – I will simply do all I can to stop her.

It may cause one or two wry smiles for those with longer political memories that this ‘defence mechanism’ is now largely in the hands of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales – that were supposed to have been killed stone dead by devolution. The question that now faces the Scottish left most directly is whether having that defence mechanism is sufficient. Should the answer come back as ‘no’, the question will take on an added significance for the future of the left elsewhere in the UK.

‘Little Britain’

Historically, the British state was seen in Scotland as a guarantor of access to markets, peace with England, religious freedom and security from external aggressors. Even as the role of the state changed in the immediate post-WWII period, everyone in Scotland still knew what Britain was ‘for’. With nationalised industries and a

nationalised health service, the role for Whitehall seemed obvious, in steering the country towards prosperity and well-being.

However, post Suez, post 1970s economic crises, and post the discovery of North Sea Oil, the idea of Britain as a guarantor of strength and prosperity began to be seriously challenged. The industrial turmoil and privatisations of the 1980s shook Scotland, but also saw the importance of the British state in national economic life diminish. With the end of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the political realignments in Europe brought by the 1989 revolutions, Britain no longer faced a plausible external threat. Together with the introduction of the European Single Market, in the space of a few short years the rationale for the British state from a Scottish perspective had effectively disappeared, while those who were influenced in their outlook by memories of the shared endeavours of WWII were becoming proportionately less significant in electoral terms.

Over time, this has opened up a range of questions for Scots. Does Britain any longer serve a purpose? If it didn't already exist, would anyone now bother to invent it? If it were to cease to be, might the left find its job easier, or more difficult? Who, other than a narrow British political class, would really notice or care if Britain simply ceased to be? And with British stock in the world at a particularly low moral ebb in the aftermath of Iraq, might it not be better to allow the new Holyrood parliament to assume full responsibility for international engagement, building instead on the more positive associations people have as regards Scotland?

Charting a different course

Even pre-devolution, Scotland had long enjoyed significant institutional autonomy in legal, educational and religious terms – something which ensured that Britain remained a union state, rather than a unitary, conformist state. Following the creation of a Scottish Parliament, the 1999-2007 Lib/Lab coalition moved

further away from the Westminster direction of travel in several important respects. A ‘learn now, charge later’ graduate endowment scheme was introduced, in preference to upfront university tuition fees. Despite considerable internal Labour scepticism, free personal care for the elderly was introduced, as was PR for local government in time for the 2007 elections – the culture change of which in terms of sweeping away long-established municipal Labour fiefdoms has perhaps yet to be fully appreciated.

To no-one’s great surprise, the advent of the SNP forming a minority administration has seen a continuance of the divergence in policy agenda north and south of the border. The graduate endowment scheme was scrapped to restore free university tuition. Marketisation of the NHS has been resisted, and in some cases reversed. Tolls were scrapped on the Forth and Tay Road Bridges, to match the previous administration’s abolition of the Erskine and Skye Bridge charges. Prescription charges began to be phased out. Business rates for premises with low rateable values were also cut, or in some cases reduced to zero.

A commitment to deliver 1000 extra police officers was met half way through the four-year term of office. ‘Concordats’ were signed with every Scottish local authority, which saw the council tax frozen and an ending to centralised, ring-fenced funding. A new generation of council house building was announced, with the ‘right to buy’ ended for new tenancies. Approval of renewable energy projects has been accelerated, and world-leading climate change legislation enacted. And while PFI was never explicitly ruled out as a funding source, its use has not been favoured, with major projects, such as the replacement Southern General Hospital in Glasgow and the proposed replacement Forth Road Bridge, to be funded through the Scottish government’s capital budget.

While there have been inevitable tussles over the rate of policy delivery, the SNP government has also earned criticism from other parties for ‘straying’ outside the terms of its responsibilities – in the party’s criticisms of plans to replace Britain’s very own Trident

WMD system; its opposition to further nuclear power stations; and its vehement opposition to the internment of the children of asylum seekers. It should be recorded that these are not criticisms which cause Scottish government ministers to lose a great deal of sleep.

Overall, the SNP government is perceived as being a competent manager of Scottish affairs. Ministers are seen as accessible and have likeable public personas. This has won a fair amount of good will and support in business, the civil service, the professions and the third sector – much of which was sceptical before, not only about independence but also, arguably, about devolution itself. The SNP hopes that, having shown it can govern devolved Scotland effectively, this will help persuade voters to back independence in a referendum, thereby transferring the remaining powers reserved to Westminster by the Scotland Act to a sovereign Holyrood Parliament.

Is this social democracy, Scottish style? Neoliberalism with a heart? Or the perpetuation of the interests of a small ‘c’ conservative, managerial Scotland? Examples can and have been picked selectively to support all of those cases. However, it’s important to judge the record of the Scottish Government with the following in mind.

Firstly, with only 47 out of 129 MSPs, it lacks a parliamentary majority. Secondly, unusually for a sub-state level administration, it has no meaningful control over its funding base, being reliant instead on taxes raised in Scotland being sent back north in the form of a block grant. Thirdly, in seeking the support of institutional Scotland for further constitutional change, and in the face of an economic downturn, embarking on a more extensive reform of sub St Andrews House government could be seen as biting off more than any government would be sensible to try and chew in a single term.

Each of these factors exerts its own restrictions on what can and can’t be done at present. In particular, the lack of a parliamentary majority has meant that much has needed to be done through

executive authority rather than legislation. This has meant that swift parliamentary footwork has been required in order to build alliances on an issue by issue basis. It's also generated an acceptance amongst those long used to the idea of a majority government at Westminster winning nearly every vote in Parliament that occasional defeats in the Holyrood chamber are now part of the landscape of administration – only the failure to pass the yearly budget and subsequent impasse need bring about a fall of the government.

The Holyrood parliament is now firmly entrenched in Scottish public life, and by virtue of its existence makes independence seem much less of a conceptual leap. With both Labour and Conservative parties promising major spending reductions after the election, which will have significant knock-on effects for Scotland, the opportunity exists for a referendum on independence to be held and won, thereby allowing the Scottish government to take control of tax, revenues and resources, and to set its own priorities completely independently of Westminster.

Debate over Scotland's future constitutional arrangements has taken on a new impetus since May 2007. The SNP government moved swiftly to launch a 'National Conversation' on independence, which saw a series of roadshows across the country giving members of the public a chance to give their views on further constitutional developments, leading to a White Paper on an Independence referendum. Almost equally as quickly, the three main unionist parties launched their own version in the form of the 'expert' Calman Commission, which, while ruling out independence from the beginning, sought to examine what changes might be made to the existing settlement within the UK. But although Calman has now reported, the Labour government has refused to implement any of its recommendations before the election, even in areas where there is agreement between all the Scottish political parties. The Conservatives, while promising that they will govern Scotland 'with respect' if they form the next administration, have refused to be bound by the report's

recommendations. With the SNP presently lacking a majority in Holyrood to legislate for an Independence referendum – unless there is a change of heart amongst opposition MSPs – the constitution seems set to become the defining issue at the fixed-term 2011 Holyrood elections.

If this seems parochial, it oughtn't to. The constitutional debate in Scotland is inextricably linked to political engagement and participation, as well as to the debate as to the kind of political economy we want to see and the means of achieving it. It is not a debate which takes place in isolation, but rather ranges across all points on the political spectrum, as parties bat back and forward the perceived advantages and disadvantages of remaining part of the UK, or embarking on independent statehood within the EU.

Something lost, something gained

Scottish MPs have played a disproportionate role in the past fifty years at Westminster, in both the Labour and Liberal Democrat leaderships, if only because the country has traditionally provided a secure base for both parties even when the Conservatives dominate in England. The SNP, too, has played its own part in holding the executive to account, notably in the last parliament in terms of attempting to impeach Tony Blair and 'Cash for Honours'.

There can be little doubt that the loss of 59 Scottish MPs is something which would change the character of the House of Commons, and also change the nature of debate to an even more English focused forum than it already is. The potential loss of Scotland's social democratic political sentiment could, initially at least, see the Westminster centre of political gravity move further towards the Conservatives, if only because of the distorting effects of the first-past-the-post voting system.

However, even at the 2005 election, when the Conservatives polled the highest number of votes in England, the party still finished 92 seats behind Labour. There is a strong constituency for

a progressive politics in the South as well as the North of England. With PR, based on votes cast in the 2005 UK general election, the 8 million Labour voters and 5 million Lib Dem voters would still have been able to exert greater influence than the representatives elected by 8 million Conservative votes.

It's clear that whatever short-term impact independence might have, the potential is there for a political realignment in England in the event of Scottish independence. In view of the growing English dissatisfaction over the West Lothian Question, it is arguably more important than ever that policies only for England should be seen to originate within England, and be able to command the majority support of English representatives, rather than be seen to have been imposed as a result of a bloc of compliant Scottish MPs whose constituents are not affected directly. The benefits in terms of the increased legitimacy of government which would arise from such a state of affairs are obvious.

The independence impact

It is part of the unionist mythology common to left, right and centre that the nations of the UK will be economically stronger, militarily more powerful and able to exert greater influence in the world acting as a single unit. In this, it is an article of faith that the influence exerted by Britain will be benign, although this has not always been the experience. But while the process of breaking up Britain might lead to certain losses to the strength of the left, it can also help to bring about a number of progressive outcomes that are currently heavily mitigated against because of the nature of the British state.

Trident is the UK's main expression of military geopolitical power, and the rest of the UK without Scotland (rUK) could certainly afford to maintain a 'son of Trident' if it chose. However, rUK would face an immediate difficulty, in that the deep water submarine base and armaments depot necessary for its operation

would henceforth be based in a ‘foreign’ country hostile to their presence. A lack of access to these facilities would be even more debilitating to the integrity of the Trident ‘deterrent’ than a withdrawal of US support for the system. The facilities at Faslane and Coulport would take years to replace elsewhere, and there is also the issue of where they would be relocated. It is therefore not beyond the realms of possibility that independence would also mean the end of the UK as a nuclear power.

Then there is the loss of Scottish service personnel to UK forces. While Scottish forces would undoubtedly find themselves serving alongside those of rUK from time to time, it is inconceivable that they would be used, as they have been in the recent past, in operations such as those in Iraq. With the UK already stretched, if Scotland’s conventional military capabilities were to be ‘lost’ in this way, rUK would find it almost impossible to fulfil its present commitments.

All of this would have a significant diplomatic impact. Nuclear weapons or not, the inevitable consequence of a reduced military capability would be a diminished status internationally. It would become increasingly difficult to justify continued rUK presence in the permanent five of the UN Security Council – particularly when a nuclear-armed Indian democracy of 800m sits outside. Although it would be fiercely resisted by the French, pressure may build to have a single European seat, or at the very least expand the number of permanent members.

Then we come to Europe, and votes in the European Parliament and Council of Ministers (CoM). An independent Scotland would see an increase in its number of MEPs; and it would for the first time gain direct representation at CoM level, with 7 votes. And a population loss of 5m would mean that the rUK’s remaining 56m would be in even further contrast to Germany’s 82m, though still having the same number of votes. One solution might be to increase the weight of German votes from 29, although this would probably be unacceptable to the French and Italians; the most likely option

would be a reduction in rUK votes from 29 to 27 – the same number as Spain and Poland. Strange but true, together with Scotland's 7 votes, this would still see Scotland and rUK with a stronger combined influence than the UK at present. It's impossible to tell how domestic rUK politicians might react to such recalibrations. However, a loss of influence in Washington may make British politicians more favourably disposed towards the opportunities for pooled sovereignty in Europe and the closer relationships which would result, as an opportunity to maintain as much influence as possible.

Conclusion

It may seem intuitive for those on the left to argue that unity is strength. However, as contradictory as it may seem at first glance, by ending the present 'one size fits nobody' dynamic of Westminster government, a number of progressive aims – unilateral nuclear disarmament, closer ties with Europe, answers to the English democratic deficit, the advancement of progressive politics in Scotland unfettered by the political choices of the rest of the UK – become easier to achieve.

New Labour had an unparalleled opportunity to recast the British narrative in 1997 in progressive terms, but despite several key advances, notably in terms of the minimum wage and devolution, largely squandered the chance through its own timidity and through its disastrous foreign policy. In the years which follow, any incoming Conservative government will almost certainly implement a policy programme which progressives find runs counter to their preferences. Under these circumstances, Scots will face a choice on whether to accept this as the price of remaining in the UK. The alternative is to vote for independence, so as to allow a Scottish government the greatest latitude in terms of setting policies in line with the broadly social democratic expectations of Scottish voters.

There is a British political class, transcending party preference, which boasts endlessly of ‘special relationships’ and ‘punching above our weight’. Particularly from a Scottish unionist perspective, the existence of the UK has allowed a number of Scottish politicians to strut and fret on a bigger stage than they could ever manage in terms solely of their home country. Independence would force Westminster politics to confront the reality of rUK as a mid-ranking European state and banish forever any lingering pretence of being a world power.

It will also force a fundamental appraisal of the nature of Britishness, Englishness and civic identities. If Scots seem further down the road to resolving outstanding issues of politics and identity in the world, it’s probably because we’ve been obsessing about it for far longer. Neither Scotland nor England requires the other in order to ensure its own decent, tolerant, outward-looking bearing in the world. Given the growing political significance of ‘Englishness’, it is imperative that the English left engages with the debate, to avoid English identity becoming synonymous with ethnicity, rather than civic values of tolerance and inclusivity.

Independence offers the freedom to Scotland and to rUK to pursue those domestic and overseas policies which each nation believes to be in the best interests of its people and others. It allows for co-operating where it is in our interests to do so, while offering the freedom to build alternative alliances where those interests do not coincide, all the while preserving everything that we value in our own, unique ‘social union’.

The Scottish narrative of a small, prosperous, socially-just, peaceful, culturally rich nation, which is respectful of difference, democracy and international law, and which has resolved its political status peacefully, could provide no more compelling example to the rest of the world, and is one which many other stateless nations in less benign circumstances would be wise to follow. In turn, England, once unshackled from the constraints of her past and liberated from the burden of Britishness, will hopefully

find itself a nation at ease with itself and its inhabitants, and able to look confidently to the future, without feeling diminished by contrasts with the past.

Richard Thomson is a former Head of Campaigns for the Scottish National Party. He is currently the SNP Westminster Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for the Gordon constituency. Richard is a columnist for the monthly Scottish Nationalist newspaper *Scots Independent* and writes his own blog at www.scotsandindependent.blogspot.com.

Which philosophy? Whose tradition?

Stuart White

There are many philosophical resources for a pluralist 'next left'

Renewal of the left is a diverse and complex task, organisational, programmatic – and philosophical. My focus here is on the philosophical. What philosophical tradition or traditions should inform the 'next left'?

In exploring this question, we have to begin by recognising that the next left is going to be a pluralist left – a cross-party left and one which has roots in new forms of civic activism as well as political parties. Having said a little more about this below (section 1), I next consider some of the philosophical traditions which this pluralist left might draw on (section 2). As a pluralist left, it is unreasonable to expect any one single tradition to hold sway. But there are important areas of overlap and shared themes which can perhaps provide the basis for a broad, shared philosophical outlook (section 3).

Pluralism

I start from the assumption that Labourism is finished. By Labourism, of course, I do not mean the Labour Party, but a specific set of assumptions about the nature of Labour and progressive politics. Three assumptions of Labourism are: (1) Labour is, more or less, the monopoly representative of

progressive politics; (2) progressive change is achieved by securing Labour unfettered control of the centralised UK state machine; this is achieved through Labour majorities in a sovereign Parliament which (3) requires a first-past-the-post electoral system.

Relax assumption (3) and Labourism unravels – which is why some in the party have been so hostile to electoral reform, or have come, late in the day, to support alternative systems (such as the Alternative Vote) that are non-proportional and still hold out some prospect of Labour majoritarianism in the future.

International evidence shows, however, that proportional electoral systems are in fact associated with better outcomes in terms of social policy and measures of inequality. Parties of the left seldom rule alone in such systems. But they often rule as coalition partners and thereby exert a persistent influence on policy. By contrast, in majority systems, left parties get into office only episodically. Moreover, when they do get into office, they have to reassure middle-class voters by shifting policy to the centre or centre-right. This is very obvious in the UK, where New Labour edges consistently to the centre right on a range of issues – civil liberties, immigration, tax, welfare – so as to retain the support of voters in key marginal constituencies, voters whose policy preferences are almost certainly to the right of the median voter in the wider population.

In short, even if one puts the essential unfairness of majoritarian electoral systems aside, the fact is that they do not deliver the social democratic goods. In the long run, you get more social democracy with a proportional system. The left should therefore support proportional representation. And, accordingly, the left needs to think of governance in coalitional, cross-party terms: the future is, so to speak, red-green-orange.

Pluralism, however, is about more than just more diversity and coalition-building between political parties at the centre. For one thing, it is about power being relocated from the centre. For

another, it is not only about parties. While Labour in office has felt compelled by electoral considerations to trim repeatedly to the centre right, a huge political space has opened up. This space has been filled, in part, by new forms of citizen activism, with agendas well to the left of the Labour government.

The prime example of this new citizen activism is, of course, London Citizens. London Citizens brings together trade union branches, faith and community groups, to work out a shared policy agenda which the organisation then presses politicians to enact. London Citizens have scored notable successes on the Living Wage. They have introduced other ideas into serious public debate that Labour is generally too frightened to touch, such as the proposal to use a small fraction of the eventual payback of the bank bailout to establish new, regionally-based and democratically-governed social investment funds. On the environment, the new citizen activism has found constructive expression in Climate Camp and the Transition Towns movement.

So pressure for progressive change will come not just from parties, but from these new forms of citizen activism (some of which may not necessarily see themselves as being of ‘the left’, but simply as pragmatic responses to real problems). Parties will, I hope, try to learn from these citizen groups. They will, I hope, compete for their support. Labour can still exercise leadership in this pluralist left. But it will have to earn this leadership, rather than being propped up by an antiquated and unfair electoral system.

Traditions for a pluralist left

If the next left will be pluralist in these ways, what will be its philosophical basis? We can explore this question in two stages. First I’ll set out the distinct philosophical perspectives which are likely to feature in this pluralist left. Then I’ll try to identify where some common, unifying ground might lie.

David Lammy MP has identified a number of relevant left

traditions we might draw on in a forthcoming article for *Fabian Review*. My list borrows from, and adds to, his:

(1) *Ethical socialism*. The ethical socialist tradition includes thinkers such as R.H. Tawney, Harold Laski, G.D.H. Cole and Michael Young. It identifies socialism with the achievement of ethical goods, notably equality, liberty and fellowship. It views a broad economic egalitarianism, of a kind that goes beyond meritocracy, as instrumental to liberty. But its ideal is not only a just distribution of economic benefits, but of a certain quality in social life: a quality of fellowship and, related to this, of mutually respectful cooperation rather than competition. The central state has an important role to play in creating the conditions for equality and (thereby) fellowship, e.g. in terms of regulating the distribution of income and wealth, and walling-off some areas of life from the market. But all of the thinkers in this tradition also express reservations about expecting too much of the central state. They emphasise the importance of local democracy and workplace democracy, and of forms of co-operation and economic mutualism, as spaces in which fellowship can become a lived reality. This aspect of ethical socialism has recently been emphasised by Maurice Glasman in his conception of 'Blue Labour' (in his contribution to *What Next for Labour?* Demos 2009).

(2) *Socialist feminism*. As articulated in the writings and activism of feminists such as Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, amongst others, socialist feminism can be seen as providing a crucially important development – transformation – of the ethical socialist tradition. These feminists echoed the emphasis on the local and the mutualistic, on the building up of a socialism of cooperative self-help, and took many initiatives which embodied this kind of socialism of everyday life. In doing so, they helped to challenge the gendered assumptions often lurking in the background (or not so far in the background) of traditional ethical socialist thought.

(3) *Social liberalism*. The social liberal tradition in Britain includes thinkers such as Leonard Hobhouse, J.A. Hobson and William Beveridge. Liberalism is defined centrally in terms of the achievement of liberty for all. Liberty is understood, however, to have material conditions: poverty is a barrier to liberty. Thus, a liberal politics must concern itself not only with civil and political liberties in the conventional sense, but with economic distribution. This leads social liberals to endorse the idea of the welfare state (and Beveridge and others were, of course, hugely important in shaping the UK's welfare state).

But social liberalism is not necessarily just about the welfare state. Another current within social liberalism emphasises the need to address both the content and distribution of private property rights. Thus, liberals have historically argued both for compulsory profit-sharing in firms and for compulsory co-determination arrangements under which the firm is governed by labour and capital. They have advanced the slogan 'Ownership for all', and have, at times, entertained some radical ideas about how to universalise asset ownership across the population.

Within contemporary academic political philosophy, the social liberal tradition occupies something like a dominant position, represented in the work of philosophers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Bruce Ackerman. Compared to the earlier, British social liberals, these thinkers arguably give more emphasis to the value of equality and to egalitarianism in the distribution of income and wealth. However, like the UK's social liberals, they do not necessarily equate egalitarianism simply with the welfare state. Drawing on the work of the British social liberal, James Meade, Rawls argues that justice requires not (merely) a welfare state but also a 'property-owning democracy' based on the 'widespread ownership of productive assets and human capital ...' (in *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, Cambridge 1999, p.xv).

(4) *Democratic republicanism*. As David Marquand has argued, democratic republicanism is an important tradition of thought in British politics – albeit one that is often implicit, shaping and informing other ‘isms’, such as socialism, feminism and liberalism, rather than standing formally on its own ground. It is a tradition which emphasises the value of popular sovereignty; the value of liberty, understood as a status of not having to live ‘at the mercy’ of another; and the value of popular, public-spirited participation in political life and collective decision-making (see Stuart White and Dan Leighton, *Building a Citizen Society* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2008 – which also includes an essay on this theme from David Marquand).

In the present UK context, democratic republicanism has two agendas. One agenda might be described as completing the UK’s imperfect transition to a modern, pluralist liberal democracy. Here we encounter the kind of constitutional reform agenda pressed by Charter 88 and its successor organisation, Unlock Democracy: electoral reform; an effective bill of rights; a Parliament more able to scrutinise the executive; abolition of the House of Lords (and ultimately, of course, of the monarchy); greater power and financial independence to local government. A second agenda, however, is to try to deepen and extend democracy beyond the late-twentieth century norm for liberal democracy. The institutions of representative democracy need to be complemented by new forms of direct and deliberative citizen engagement in collective decision-making, e.g., in the design and delivery of public services.

This second agenda also carries over into the economic sphere. Democratic republicans see inequality of wealth (not just income, but assets) as a threat to individual liberty and to popular sovereignty. As such, they seek a greater equality in the distribution of assets and ways of increasing popular, deliberative control over assets and investment.

(5) *Marxism*. Marxism has been an important intellectual resource for the left in the UK and, in some ways, remains so. Although some of Marx's specific predictions about capitalism are empirically wrong and based at times on dubious logic, there is much still to be learned from the kind of political economy he helped to pioneer. Works such as Andrew Glyn's *Capitalism Unleashed* (OUP 2006), produced from within a broadly marxist framework, provide extremely helpful insights into the economic terrain we are now on. More generally, marxism can help provide a much-needed dose of demystifying realism about structural inequalities, without which the moralising of ethical socialists, social liberals and democratic republicans can all too easily become naive and (in the bad sense of the term) utopian. Particularly useful are the currents of 'analytical Marxism', represented in the work of academics such as Erik Olin Wright and the 'Real Utopias' project he has organised at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; and the Gramscian Marxism which informed analysis of Britain's economic and political crisis in the 1970s and the right's response to it in the 1980s.

What about 'green' political thinking? That doesn't feature explicitly on the list I've just given, but the next left, pluralist as it might be, will surely be a thoroughly green left.

Certainly, a future left must confront environmental constraints realistically in a way that neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats have to date. In this sense, the future can indeed only lie with an eco-socialism (and/or eco-liberalism and/or eco-republicanism). Some serious environmentalists, such as Jonathon Porritt, are sceptical that the old 'isms' are able to cope with the new environmental challenges. But this is not a persuasive claim. On the one hand, the philosophical traditions outlined above are not necessarily, in their very fabric, committed to environmentally destructive economic growth. They contain resources that point in a very different direction. Ethical socialism emphasises the value of social relationships rather than the level of output. The liberal

tradition initiated by Mill emphasises an individualism centred around self-development much more than material acquisition.

There are, moreover, multiple ways by which societies can adjust to environmental constraints, some much less egalitarian or democratic than others. Which of these one prefers will depend on one's prior affinities to the ideas of socialism, liberalism and so on. In this respect, a progressive eco-politics is not only compatible with the earlier traditions, but arguably *requires* them, and will tacitly draw upon them.

This is not at all to disparage green politics. Quite the opposite: it is to explain why green politics (in and outside of the Green Party) is frequently a better expression of ethical socialist or social liberal or democratic republican values than the parties one might expect to be the vehicles for these traditions.

3. Common themes?

If these are some – just some – of the traditions which can and should inform the next, pluralist left, what would constitute a common ground for such a left?

First we should note that the various 'isms' described above, while distinct, are also overlapping. Democratic republicanism has often manifested itself through ethical socialism (e.g., in the work of Tawney) or feminism (Hilary Wainwright) or social liberalism ('ownership for all') or, indeed marxism (e.g., the humanist marxism of E.P. Thompson). There is a great overlap between the work of an ethical socialist like Tawney and a social liberal like Hobhouse or Rawls. Gramscian marxism and analytical marxism have both, in their respective ways, moved onto philosophical ground akin to that of ethical socialists and social liberals. And there are other theoretical perspectives, not outlined above, such as Paul Hirst's associative democracy, which offer syntheses of elements from these other various traditions.

The lesson I take from this is that one should not invest too

much in such ‘isms’. It is valuable to know where to look for guidance and inspiration. But we should not become too preoccupied with insisting on adherence to any specific ‘ism’.

If we look into the overlap between the perspectives, and combine this with a sense of where contemporary problems and grievances lie, then I think we can identify at least five common themes for this pluralist left:

(1) *Consolidating and deepening democracy*. First, there is perhaps a potentially shared concern to consolidate and deepen democracy. This can extend from, on the one hand, the traditional constitutional reform agenda we associate with Charter 88, to, on the other, more radical ideas about increasing popular participation in the state and economy.

(2) *Consolidating and expanding civil liberties*. Second, there is a potentially shared concern to protect civil liberties. Certainly social liberals, republicans and red-green radicals influenced by Marx can all agree that the present Labour government has overseen an alarming curtailment of civil liberties and expansion of arbitrary police and executive power. This must be reversed and civil liberties better protected as part of a broader agenda of restructuring the British state.

(3) *Greater equality in the distribution and control of wealth*. All of the perspectives give us reason to support greater equality in the distribution and/or control of wealth – by which I mean assets rather than income. For social liberals and republicans, this concern will in part be about the distribution of wealth to individuals (the old Liberal ideal of ‘ownership for all’). But that agenda of individual empowerment can and should be complemented by one which looks also to forms of collective empowerment over the disposition of wealth, e.g. the London Citizens’ proposal, noted above, to establish a range of locally-oriented, citizen-managed social investment funds.

(4) *The renewal of mutualism.* The ethical socialist, feminist and social liberal traditions all emphasise the value of ‘mutualism’: of forms of ownership and social provision which embody the ideas of co-operative self-help and mutual aid. Republicans can share this perspective insofar as mutualism offers a way to make the distribution and control of wealth more equal and/or a way of promoting greater citizen participation in collective decision-making. However, many of the traditions also provide resources for a critique of relying too much on efforts at co-operative self-help without appropriate regulatory and distributive support from the state (including the central state). It is not a matter of ‘rolling forward society’ at the expense of the state but of reconfiguring what the state does (and how it does what it does).

(5) *A politics of ‘quality’ not (just) ‘quantity’.* A final theme concerns ‘quality of life’ as opposed to ‘quantity of output’. This has always been a core theme of the ethical socialist tradition. Through the influence of thinkers like Raymond Williams, whose *Culture and Society* charted the history of an important (if problematical) current of qualitative criticism of capitalism, Gramscian marxism has also sometimes echoed this theme. Social liberals will recall how Mill was a key figure in this tradition. The focus on the qualitative is valuable in its own right, but obviously also speaks to our drastic condition of incipient environmental crisis and the need to curb consumerism.

The themes arguably come together in a reasonably coherent way. There is, perhaps, an underlying sense of trying to build a society that is more equal and actively cooperative, and in which people derive greater fulfilment from shared, democratic participation rather than individualised consumption.

The themes can of course be taken up in more and less radical ways. A future left will have its internal ‘left’ and ‘right’ who develop different, competing policy agendas from these shared themes. But

these might perhaps be some of the shared themes around which the next left will agree to disagree.

Stuart White teaches political theory at Jesus College, Oxford, and is currently Director of the Public Policy Unit at Oxford University. He is the author of *Equality* (Polity, 2006), co-editor of *Building a Citizen Society: The Emerging Politics of Republican Democracy* (L&W 2008), and is on the editorial advisory board of *Renewal*.



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