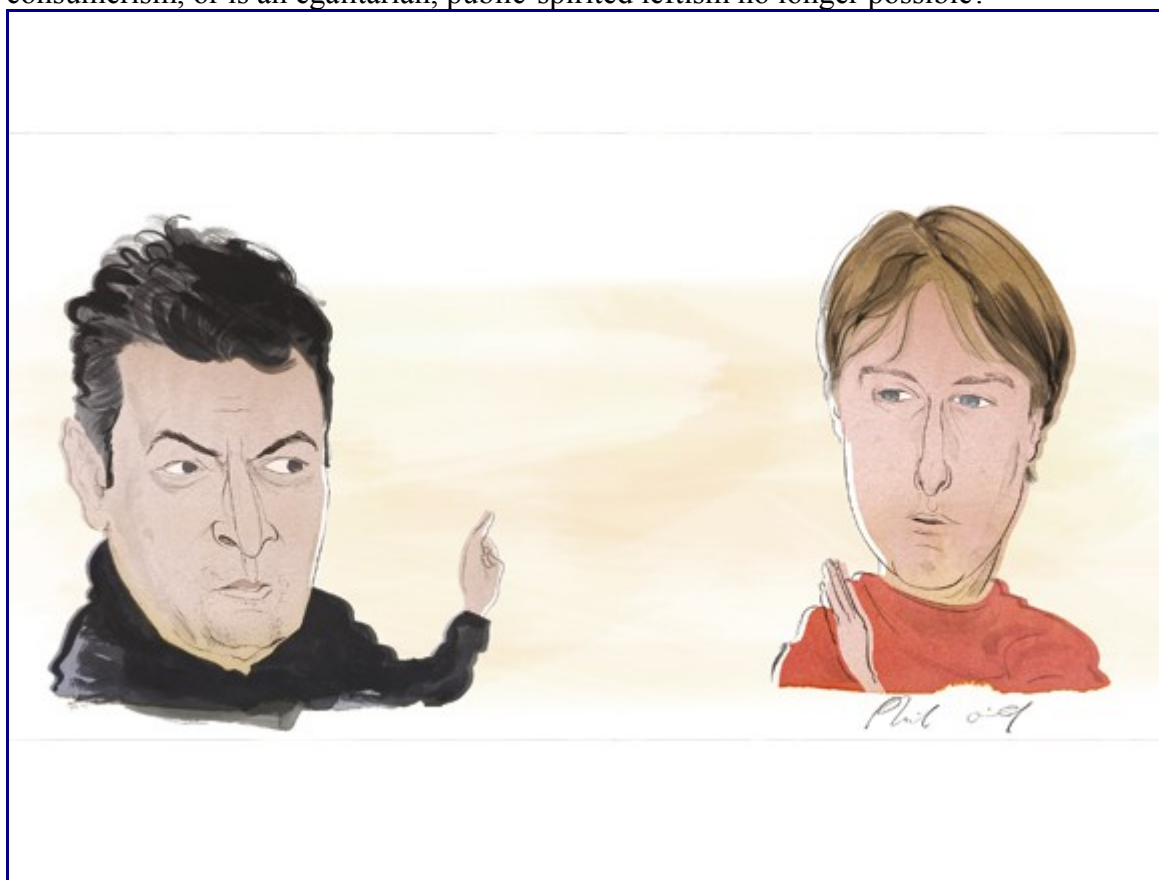


The Prospect debate: does Britain's left have a future?

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Is it all over for Labour? Should the party ignore leftist rants against individualism and consumerism, or is an egalitarian, public-spirited leftism no longer possible?



Dear John

8th September 2009

Let's not call this exchange "Can Labour win," because we both know it won't. Soon I will be liberated from the weary responsibility of treating a well-meaning but tired government fairly, and you from being disappointed by it. Unconstrained, we can make for the sunny uplands of opposition, where everything seems possible and nothing in fact is. Except thought.

So let's call this, "Thoughts about the future of the left" and here are some of mine. But first let me try and cut through a predictable misreading of recent history, so that we aren't basing our discussion on false premises. The government just departing was not in thrall to some evil thing called neoliberalism. The idea that Tony Blair or Gordon Brown, with their overwhelming emphasis on state-funded services and the role of government, were mad neoliberals was always a leftist (or

occasionally a rightist) fantasy. Many of the things they tried to do are still the objectives of any good progressive.

But this is 2009, not 1997. In a recent issue of the *New Statesman*, political theorist Stuart White set out a useful taxonomy of progressives. He discerned four strains of reform thinking: left communitarianism, left republicanism, centre republicanism and right communitarianism. The latter consists of Phillip Blond-type “red Tories.” I see you as suspended between the first two—epitomised by the increasingly eccentric Neal Lawson and the more staid David Marquand. I’m sure you’ll put me right.

I found myself mostly defined by White’s description of centre republicanism, with its emphasis on dispersal of power, enhancing fairness and maintaining freedom, while embracing modernity. I mean by that a position which doesn’t regret (as communitarians do) the revolutions in technology, communication and mobility that have brought the world together, but understands that the consequences have to be managed.

The better world does require that we abolish unjustifiable inequalities, gross unfairness and barriers to human fulfilment. We can agree that progress cannot be measured entirely or even mostly by GDP. Of the alternative ways of gauging the just society I am most convinced by Amartya Sen’s idea of capability (see James Purnell’s article, p42)—a less restrictive concept either than equality of income or happiness, since it takes account of the different ways in which people want to lead their lives.

In the Sen tradition, German political scientist Wolfgang Merkel lays out five priorities for a just society: preventing poverty; enhancing education and training; labour market inclusion; maintaining social security, and more just distribution of wealth and incomes. Measures to address climate change and gender justice would fit into this last principle.

What is critical here is that justice crosses national borders. The new world must be open. We must ask ourselves what is fair or just about exporting unemployment to poorer countries, or denying any right to improvement to people because they are foreign born.

Where Labour (and everyone else) has failed most spectacularly is in political engagement. This situation deserves the description of “crisis” and it partly emerges from a failure to notice how democracy has been transformed. In *The Life and Death of Democracy* (Simon & Schuster) John Keane argues that representative democracy has evolved into what he calls “monitory” democracy (in which hundreds, if not thousands, of formal and informal bodies and procedures monitor, restrict, comment on and affect the operation of power). This should be the beginning of a new discussion. Reforms aimed at lowering the barrier between citizen and participation are only a part of how we need to change. A complete revolution in the everyday language of politics is also required, so politicians can be honest with voters, instead of feeling they have to dissemble and hide.

A word now about the snares and delusions that can abet our debate. The communitarian assault on individualism and consumerism (and, often, on internationalism) leads nowhere, except to the right. A hankering for downshifted, make-your-own-entertainment communities, served by 1950s-style public services, is pointless. It is as absurd as imagining that you can have social justice without economic growth. I am not saying that we couldn’t seek to emphasise the values of kindness and caring over egotism—we could. But village life circa 1932? Nope.

If this sounds abstract, let me explain. It means agreeing that demographic shifts and wide dispersal of money and knowledge are fundamental realities, not trends to be resisted. It rejects as right-wing (or unjust and unprogressive) policies such as cutting inheritance tax, the Liberal Democrat pledge to save money by reducing planned participation in higher education (the polar opposite of what we should be doing), the abolition of property tax (which would favour the old and wealthy over the young) or Frank Field’s increasingly troubling anti-immigrant campaign.

People from other parties might sign up for much of this prospectus. But it is in the Labour party

where the next struggle over such ideas will take place. Or so we hope.

Yours

David

Dear David

10th September 2009

First, a word about our apparently departing government being in thrall to neoliberalism. Things have been more complicated than that—but if people on my side complain about new Labour’s kowtowing to the free-market right, we have good reason. One of the articles of faith for the centre-left was the apparently reasonable idea—partly rooted in Tony Crosland’s model of social democracy—that the stoking of economic growth would provide the resources for transformative social programmes. But this was turned into a mish-mash of beliefs that only entrenched the changes wrought by Margaret Thatcher. High finance was left alone, Britain became something close to a tax haven, and there was no arguing with “flexible” labour markets. Among the upshots is a sobering fact: that a Labour government leaves office with the inequality gap wider than when it took power.

You mention new Labour’s “overwhelming emphasis on state-funded services” as an indicator of their progressive bona fides—but again, things were surely more complicated. Over the past decade, public sector reform has been built around three pillars: a centralised target culture, new outsourced private monopolies and an emphasis on “choice,” or more often its illusion. Within all this, the plotline of the past 12 years has been the top-downery of old Labour meshing with the Thatcher inheritance—the contorted paradigm from which the centre-left has to escape.

Like you, I was taken with Stuart White’s taxonomy, and you’re probably right to place me somewhere in between left communitarianism and left republicanism— though I’m perplexed by a couple of your other points. First, you’ll have to explain why communitarians regret that revolutions in technology and mobility have brought the world together. Yes, I do regret that increased global mobility has been used as a pretext for a race to the bottom in labour markets, but that’s not an argument against mobility itself.

Moreover, I don’t think the technological revolution need worry people on my side of the debate. Look, for example, at the Creative Commons movement—who see in the ease of online collaboration a collectivist, all-hands-to-the-pump logic very different from that of the free market. But anyway: I think we agree on the imperative to meaningfully disperse power and maintain freedom. It’s on the question of enhancing fairness that I think we may have our most interesting exchange.

The vogue for Amartya Sen’s notion of equality of capability opens up a conversation about social justice, but I also sense its slightly slippery use as a means for avoiding any convincing stance on inequalities of income and wealth. Of late, the former cabinet minister James Purnell and his friends Richard Reeves at Demos and Philip Collins at the LSE—centre republicans, apparently—seem to have got dangerously close to this. Given that there are clear correlations between some of Britain’s most unsettling social outcomes and its high rates of income and wealth inequality (witness Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s slam-dunk of a book *The Spirit Level*, Allen Lane) this is surely where we must focus our attention. If politicians were to do so, that would represent one very important victory in your proposed “revolution in the everyday language of politics”: an exploding of the absurd idea that you can increase mobility without shortening the ladders that run between social classes.

In policy terms, this would lead to some fiscal proposals that our cash-strapped times arguably demand anyway (strange, isn’t it, how after 12 years of Labour government, “cuts” remain the only talked-about option?). Instead of apologising for the new 50p rate, Labour should calmly make the

case for higher tax at the top. As you point out, inheritance taxes will have to be supported anew, particularly if the Conservatives honour their pledge to raise the threshold. Over time, plenty of people at the bottom should be taken out of tax altogether. But any conversation about inequality must also turn to the services and institutions that embed economic division, or can be used to break it down.

A few random examples. If we ever get round to building the homes Britain needs, most new developments should be split between owned, rented and shared-equity housing. Mutualisation needs to be developed, and not just in the financial sector. The quality of people's working lives—which politicians never, ever talk about—has to be vastly improved.

To address some other points: yes, any worthwhile centre-left politics is necessarily cosmopolitan and internationalist, and if any response to hard times turns isolationist (a danger latent within a good deal of green politics) it doesn't deserve the name. But in your warnings about "snares and delusions," I sense straw men. The left must urgently find a language to talk about individualism and consumerism and map out a society built on different values. You think my friend Neal Lawson is "increasingly eccentric," which is presumably a reference to his anti-shopping treatise *All Consuming* (Penguin). I think he has a point: that there is a thread linking rising inequality and social strife with a culture increasingly based around almost neurotic spending—or rather, borrowing.

People on the left should always be wary of hairshirts and piety, but the point needs making: the good society is not one in which people rack up vast debts, and have to work so hard to stay afloat that they end up on Galbraith's treadmill. What underlies this is not a quest to, as you put it, return to "village life circa 1932"—but the idea of propagating a different conception of what it is to be human than *Homo economicus*, and perhaps nudging Britain closer to the social model that prevails in most of western Europe. What do you think?

Yours

John

Dear John

11th September 2009

This new man, conceived as an alternative to *Homo economicus*, is to be found, if I understand your last paragraph, in Belgium. There, apparently, *Homo harriensis* dwells in muted glory. So when you ask "what do you think?" my answer is, "what of?" because I find myself trawling your negatives (Thatcher, neurotic spending, big business, rising inequality) for clues as to your positives.

This is why I diverted off onto Neal Lawson—the Mary Whitehouse of shopping—because I wanted to know whether you shared the analysis of his recent work, which, in my view, is a fusion of left and right communitarianism. Left to their own devices, and gulled by the genii of the marketplace, people in Britain and the US (but not, it seems, in Belgium) are reduced to mere consumers, deprived of spiritual and intellectual nourishment, made uncaring of relationships and hungry only for things.

I don't think people are at all like that, and while I can deprecate with the best of them the unkindness and incivility of some popular culture, I believe that the declinist narrative is elitist and nostalgic. How is it that consumerism only became a problem when the masses began to enjoy conditions that the professional classes had long taken for granted? I absolutely concede the necessity for huge individual, collective, local, national, international action to prevent climate change, and also believe that the way in which we carelessly consume will have to alter. But not because we are wicked super-materialists who merit punishment, but because we now know things that we didn't before.

A second thread running through your response is the “private bad, collective good” strain, which regards education and health choice as inevitably chimerical, and private provision of public goods as, of itself, anomalous. You mention the Creative Commons movement and want to use it to reclaim the internet from capitalism. Fine, let a thousand flowers bloom, but who created the new world of information technology? The answer is not the ministry of technological revolution, working in tandem with the Guardian media collective. Nor do I believe in some magical quality called “the public-sector ethos” that only exists in state-run or non-profit organisations. As to choice in education and healthcare—I exercise it all the time, in the same way that only the wealthy used to go to Spain. So will others, in time.

But these are preoccupations, not essential preconditions. You are suspicious of capabilities because the concept could be used to divert attention from your income inequality. Here I just want you to reflect on what a monocausalist work the “slam-dunk” work of Wilkinson and Pickett really is. It effectively says that income inequality is the root of almost all known evils. Now, I don’t agree with all its correlations from a purely statistical point of view and, along with others, I cannot see the causal relationship. You, however, buy it all, and that can only mean a total concentration on reducing income inequality (hello Homo economicus) by transferring money from better to worse off. While we Sen-ists envision a myriad ways of increasing the capabilities of the deprived, you—to be true to yourself—have just one. Yet where are we to find it in your first-draft manifesto? “Higher tax at the top” doesn’t remotely cover it. If your primary aim is to reduce income inequality radically, you are talking about a massive re-engineering of tax policy. Put bluntly, most people in the top 50 per cent of earners should be paying more. Much more. Why aren’t you saying so?

Yours

David

Dear David

12th September 2009

Ah! Homo aaronovitchus, I presume—I missed him in your first email. Presumably by way of bathos, my “most of western Europe” gets reduced to the sitcom standby of Belgium. Still, while the Flemish and Walloons duke it out, their country’s hierarchies are less steep than our own; their Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality) was 33, as against Britain’s 36 and the US’s 40.8. But let’s look instead at the recent Scandinavian experience, which surely proves that if we were to create the excess capacity that your desired model of public services necessarily entails, it would mean an expansion of provision that is impossible in present political debate. If your suggested truth-crusade came to pass, I’d hope someone might point that out.

I think I recognise your portrayal of Lawson et al: when such things were fashionable, I read similar critiques of supposed left-wing haughtiness by Jean Baudrillard. I actually don’t think many people have been reduced to “mere” consumers but, here and in the US, there’s a danger of production and consumption squashing our more caring, familial side—something that your postmodern acceptance-cum-indifference ignores. Some questions: is the fact that Britons have some of the highest personal debt in the world a problem? Are you concerned about work-life balance? If, to quote Gordon Brown, a town is more than a marketplace, does the demise of our everyday infrastructure threaten something not just precious, but socially useful? Such concerns aren’t Arcadian delusion, as your past attempts to debunk them suggest. In 2008, you said that visiting post offices was an “antique habit” (my eBay-addicted friends would disagree), and that petrol stations could just as easily serve as social hubs. Maybe you should get out more.

I do believe in the public-sector ethos, and think it best blooms in state and non-profit organisations. That’s why staff turnover in private prisons is ahead of public jails, and the outsourcing of hospital cleaning results in dirtier wards. To briefly digress and disabuse you of the idea that I want to “reclaim the internet from capitalism” (something that sounds like a project dreamt up by your old

chums in the Communist party), I have long known that profit serves popular culture, information technology and God knows what else admirably well. Put it in the context of outsourced monopolies and Britain's unending drive to cut costs, however, and it fails us.

Yes, most people in the top 50 per cent of earners should probably pay more tax, but I'm from the old gradualist wing of the Labour movement—Methodist, not Marxist—and until our sleepwalking intellectual battalions come up with a phrase that bests the right-wing trope of the “tax burden,” we must move a couple of steps at a time.

You say you have trawled my “negatives” and want some “positives.” If, as I assume, you mean an indication of what I can celebrate after 12 years of Labour government, I can oblige. Here's another question, though. It's been your chosen role in recent years to try and puncture no end of leftie balloons, but aside from the list of broad social goals you took from Merkel, I still get no hardened sense of where you think Britain ought—or ought not—to be headed. Maybe I'm going to find the first stirrings of the good society in among petrol pumps, charcoal briquettes and Ginsters pasties, but I doubt it. What do you think is most wrong with Britain? And just to be topical, how do you feel about the seemingly unstoppable rise of a Tory party reverting to type at speed, and new Labour's pathetic response to it?

Yours

John

Hi John

13th September 2009

OK, not “most of western Europe” but—as ever—Scandinavia. Your tone sounds radical but your prescriptions seem so mild. And I do “get out” but not only among left folk. I'll overlook the Communist party and briquettes jibes to suggest that we can still sleep in the same bed, providing you don't fixate on left shibboleths such as “less private provision in the public sector” or “death to choice.” This is especially true given what may be coming. The signs are that, after the election, caring, inclusive Cameronianism will be under pressure from a kind of modern Poujadism, which whacks the reins back on internationalism, so as to boost the most vocal sections of the middle classes. In this battle, the Lib Dems will be unreliable allies, facing first one way, then another.

A new Labour leader in opposition, devoted to enhancing the capabilities of the British people, and people abroad, will have to be brave, honest, clear and believable. It won't be Jon Cruddas, just in case you have him in mind, because—engaging though he may be—he is not much more than a plausible tease. So I think it must be a Miliband. But which one should it be?

In anticipation

David

Dear David

14th September 2009

Sleeping in the same bed, eh? Quite a thought. I'm also a fan of arrangements that prevail in France, Germany and even Italy—but as you know, whereas left-wing hearts once fluttered at the mention of Leningrad, Scandinavia is the modern social democrat's inspiration. It offers evidence of possibilities beyond the Thatcher inheritance, and our own frayed mixture of inequality, insecurity and illiberalism.

“Less private provision in the public sector” and “death to choice” are your words, but what they denote takes us straight to what a Conservative government will prove: that Westminster groupthink rarely manages a vision of reform more interesting than handing chunks of public provision to the private companies who increasingly form a kind of shadow state; and that, though real choice would

be a great and wondrous thing, unless provision is seriously expanded, we'll always get the chimerical version, entrenching the problems it's often intended to solve: witness the archetypal over-subscribed academy (or new Michael Gove school) that starts indulging in de facto selection.

Is my general prescription "mild"? I hope not. I've got friends and relatives who aren't "left folk," but when politics calls I keep the company of people whose tastes are fairly transformative. Cruddas, incidentally, is no tease: whether he throws in his hat or not, he's one of the few high-profile Labour politicians trying to think the party out of its moribund state. So, if the way he's run the climate change department is anything to go by, is Ed Miliband—if pushed, I pick him as a great hope, partly because he also seems more open to my kind of arguments than, say, you. Still, see you at the anti-Poujadist barricades. I'll bring the briquettes.

Yours fraternally

John

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