Responses

Social democracy and the problem of agency

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This essay is prompted by *Renewal*'s issue on 'Futures for social democracy' (Vol 15 (2/3), 2007), specifically by three personal responses to it.

The first of these is that that the left (1) is not short of policies, both strategic and immediate. There is really now a cast-iron case that the market-centred policies of neo-liberalism produce a society with a recurrent and intensifying social malaise. A left government should have little difficulty in preparing a shortlist of policies to counter this and to work towards longer-term objectives of the 'good life'. The problem, of course, is just how to get this government into power.

The second is that social democracy has a good long-term historical memory, but suffers from a form of short-term amnesia. It is all to the good to recall that the political left in its wider meaning had its roots in issues of democracy, liberty and equality and that the socialist hegemony over that left with its emphasis on the over-arching question of ownership led to a number of false alleys, notably that of believing that nationalisation was the primary tool of a socialist government even compared with other forms of social ownership. However, this memory, as seen in this issue of *Renewal*, comes to shuddering halt about forty years ago when the post-war consensus in Western Europe, largely brokered by social democracy, began to break down. That breakdown, effectively complete in Britain, is still underway in other parts of the continent. One rather seductive idea for social democrats is that it never has gone away in Sweden and that this survival still offers us a model, and there may be some truth in this. But the fact remains that short-term amnesia is a disabling condition for short-term actions. It is possible to gain considerable happiness in life from full possession of long-term memory but it is difficult to function socially if one cannot remember what happened last week.

The third observation is that, however well-constructed are possible left policies, the evidence of the *Renewal* essays is that even a revitalised social democracy struggles with the problem of agency: that is just how the policies so clearly detailed can become enacted in some way. David Coates' largely admirable essay really highlights this. It is, of course, true that

> The left … needs to view the Brown government as the gateway to a more radical future, rather than an agent capable of delivering that future if not pushed. Pushing and pulling will therefore be vital. (Coates, 2007, 114)

Similarly 'It is time for New Labour ministers to face underlying class realities, realise who their true dancing partners are, and incrementally re-design their dance routines accordingly'. Metaphors have their place but politics does require that one names the names. Just who are these 'true partners' and just what is the dance they are being asked to perform?

In this essay, I want to investigate the problem of agency in a more concrete way, using as my starting point political opposition to the Thatcher government in the 1980s (a longer analysis of this can be found in Prior and Purdy, 2007), in particular focussing on four key struggles of the period: the miners' strike of 1984; the assault on local authority independence after 1984; the camp at Greenham common beginning in 1981; and the protracted campaign against nuclear power.

The struggle against Thatcherism

The suicidal attempt by Arthur Scargill in 1984-5 to use the miners' union to promote what amounted, at least in fantasy, to an anti-Thatcher uprising over the bodies of his hapless miners needs little recitation. It was a traumatic disaster for the whole of the left whether or not they opposed the strike. What is less recognised is that the strike was the final act of a drama involving the entire British union movement and its contradictory role in the social-democratic post-war consensus, and not an unfortunate aberration.

The second struggle was the assault by the re-elected Thatcher government on the power of local councils. This was a more complex, though less heart-breaking, issue than the miners' strike, centring around the democratic rights of locally-elected bodies to resist central *diktat* as to how they should raise money. At the beginning of the Thatcher government, Labour councils were confident in the electoral mandate which had been handed to them in 1981 when Labour regained several important cities, notably Liverpool (from the Liberals) and the GLC, a huge metropolitan council which had been originally constructed to have an apparently inbuilt Conservative majority. These bodies had independent revenue-raising power over both business and households which, when Thatcher attempted to cut council spending centrally, they used in defiant compensation. At this time, such independent council spending amounted to nearly thirty per cent of all state expenditure. In 1984, after re-election, the Conservatives brought in new law which removed the power to set business rates and gave central government power to cap domestic rates. There was a widespread effort by councils all over England, amongst them the GLC (led by Ken Livingstone), South Yorkshire (David Blunkett) and Islington (Margaret Hodge), to refuse to abide by capping and to set 'illegal' rates, defying the government to take over council administration by the appointment of commissioners. The key twin *foci* were Liverpool, which seemed resolute in its intent not to set a balanced budget within the limits of the rate-capping imposed by central government, and the GLC. They seemed set upon the same path as George Lansbury and Poplar Council in 1921, which had led to imprisonment, mass support for the jailed councillors and ultimately to their victory; and, on a smaller scale, Clay Cross council in the 1970s. In the event, the GLC simply backed down (2) whilst the Militant-dominated Liverpool council and the leadership of the Labour Party seemed more intent on squaring up to each other than defeating the government.

It is up to historians to judge just how fragile was the hold of Thatcherism on Britain in the mid-1980s, the years when the most ferocious of its neo-liberal policies were being implemented. The urban riots of the early part of the decade had already placed markers for the deep opposition faced by this agenda, whilst the repressive tactics used to crush the miners' strike, which had almost amounted to martial law in some places, had sickened a very wide section of society. That there was a strong undertow of support for the miners was shown in 1992 when, in the pouring rain, the largest political demonstration between the Aldermaston marches and the anti-war demonstration in 2003, took place almost spontaneously in London. It was to protest the plan by Michael Heseltine to close most of the remnant of the British coal industry and suggested that, if a more careful and less fragmented protest had been undertaken in 1984, it could have succeeded. Again, if a significant number of councils had stuck by their initial avowals to refuse to set rates under the new capping rules, then an entirely new path might have been set for British politics. It was, after all, only a few years on, in 1990, that Thatcher herself was effectively deposed by the threat of widespread civil disorder over the poll tax. Be that as it may, the fact of the times was that the manner in which resistance collapsed with so many left-wing Dukes of York turning back just as the top of the hill approached led to dismay and disillusion towards, and within, the left, which has lasted to the present day. In electoral terms, it is from this time that one can date the erosion of Labour support in the Northern cities which were at one time its main bastions. There was considerable popular support for resistance to the Thatcherite assault on local councils which were clearly and correctly seen as attacks on representative democracy. One can still see residual signs of this in, for example, Livingstone's enduring popularity in London despite his failure to carry through opposition to rate-capping; in Dave Nellist's continuing presence on Coventry Council fifteen years after nearly winning the constituency as Independent Labour after his de-selection; and, perhaps most remarkably, in Tommy Sheridan, who fought the 1992 election standing in Glasgow Pollock from a prison cell serving six months for anti-poll tax actions (3).

The third popular struggle which took place in the 1980s was one whose outcome was more positive. In September, 1981, a march by a small group of women from Cardiff arrived at the gate of the Greenham Common US air-force base, to protest against the planned positioning there of cruise missiles. They set up a camp which in various forms was to last nineteen years and to spark a whole variety of linked protests including several mass demonstrations, civil disobedience, imprisonment and challenges all the way to the High Court over the legality of the nuclear build-up. Greenham emerged from the two left movements of the 1960s and 1970s which had escaped domination by the 'socialist left': the anti-nuclear campaigns begun by CND at the end of the 1950s, and feminism – a combination which, although disputatious, managed to avoid the suicidal progress of the two other popular protests against the Thatcher regime. Just what role, the Greenham Common camps played in shifting nuclear policy in that decade is unclear. But in political terms the final result was, at the very least, a good draw for the protesters. The Greenham women took rough policing, prosecution and vicious vilification in the press and emerged with massive international publicity and support. They were, so far as left protest of the times went, the last women left standing. They also spawned a genuinely new kind of left, one in which new forms of organisation developed which centred around consensus, the absence of leaders and a willingness to place most emphasis upon personal direct action rather than indirect political representation. The anti-global capitalism and environmental movements of today draw a great deal from this.

The final important movement of the 1980s was the opposition to nuclear power which was mobilised in 1977 at the Windscale public inquiry, carried on through the Sizewell inquiry which began in 1983 and lasted for 340 working days, and went through to the Hinkley Point inquiry in 1989. At each of these, anti-nuclear witnesses argued over many months that nuclear power was unsafe, uneconomic and not needed. They lost every one of the three inquiries but, in the event, were proved right on nearly all aspects of their case. They laid the base for the effective demise of nuclear power as a feasible option for twenty years, shifting public opinion to the extent that, whereas at the end of the 1970s nuclear was a generally accepted policy option, now a government that appears to once again favour nuclear is forced to conceal this in a policy smokescreen.

A fifth element in this drama could be added: the Labour Party playing the role of the dog which didn't bark at Margaret Thatcher as the Hound of the Baskervilles. Again, it will be up to historians to work out just how and why the Labour opposition to the Conservative governments between 1979 and 1992 was so feeble. This was, after all, a regime which began by irreversibly devastating the British economy and then proceeded to a set of policies – privatisation, council house sales, limiting council powers and so on – which never had great popular support (4). Was it just internecine warfare leading first to the defection of much of its right-wing then directed against a few hundred members of Militant? My own view is that the failure of the socialist left, both 'hard' and 'soft' (5), to effectively oppose the newly elected and still fragile neo-liberal policies of Thatcherism, was that they had no hegemonic perspective outside the militant labourism of the 1970s which had already been defeated by the end of that decade. The widespread confusion of the time over just how to react to the miners' strike, not least amongst Labour leadership, was a symptom of this. But, however one wishes to construe the decade, the main thrust of Labour under Neil Kinnock's inept leadership was to begin a process of demolishing the ability of its members to control policy formation and, instead, to limit its role to that of an electoral support group.

The most obvious sign of Labour's feebleness was that all four of the campaigns against facets of Thatcherism were led either by people who had no significant links to the party or by hard-line socialists who were disowned by it. The culminating evidence for its dismal performance was that the final removal of the great Beelzebub herself (to use Gordon Brown's rhetorical naming) was engineered by the direct action against the poll tax of a protest movement effectively outside the Labour Party and – insofar as its actions involved civil disobedience or disorder – was again disowned by it.

Old agencies, new resistances

The passage of political opposition to Thatcherism in the 1980s has profound implications for the British left in this century. Social democracy in Britain has had, historically, three great interlocking agencies to propel its policies into practice – trade unions, local councils and the Labour Party. By the end of the 1980s, all three were in full retreat as significant agents of political change, in the case of the first two under the weight of the legislative and administrative attacks of the Conservative government, the last from an assault by its own leaders. The process continued through the 1990s and has not been stopped under New Labour.

Trade union membership density has more than halved since its peak of around fifty per cent in 1979 and is now significantly tilted towards the elderly (6). Council autonomy can be measured by recent research showing that the discretionary budget of one representative Northern town (Burnley) amounted to only five per cent of its nominal budget, whilst local funding of councils has dropped to twenty-five per cent from around sixty per cent in the mid-1980s using a local council tax which is now highly regressive given a refusal to revalue property in England. The Labour Party has been recently described by its sympathetic pressure group, Compass, as ‘a hollowed-out shell’ (Compass, 2007, 32), a process sealed by the recent removal of any right to debate resolutions at the annual conference. The result has been that social democrats may have the best policies but the means available for pushing those policies forward have been reduced to one: catching the attention of the appropriate government adviser, often one appointed from the ranks of finance capital.

The two popular movements of the 1980s which lay effectively outside the remit of social democracy have fared rather better. The experience of the last twenty years of British politics, despite our self-ordained national reputation for political orderliness, is that a combination of single-issue advocacy plus civil disobedience is the best way of achieving at least limited political success. Margaret Thatcher’s head may have been the first scalp of civil disorder, but there have been other, at least partially successful, efforts since. The practical exclusion of genetically modified crops from British agriculture, despite firm support from the Labour government, is one example as is shifts in controls on the use of animals in laboratory research. The roads programme is another. Soon airport expansion will be faced with mass popular civil disobedience as will any attempt to build nuclear power plants. It can, of course, be argued that such actions can only be undertaken against physical manifestations of policy and that they are essentially negative. Mass mobilisation of a more positive kind has had mixed results. Notoriously, the mass demonstration against the Iraqi war failed. On the other hand, the march on Edinburgh to ‘Make Poverty History’ could be claimed to have had at least limited effect. Local political action has followed a similar pattern with opposition to hospital and school closures, speculative land development, super-stores and the like being undertaken by *ad hoc* pressure groups rather than organised political parties. Again success of such actions is inevitably mixed but led in one case to election of an independent non-affiliated MP, a doctor, Richard Taylor, who campaigned against a PFI hospital in Kidderminster.

Slavoj Žižek has recently described this ‘new politics of resistance’ incorporating ‘anti-war movements, ecological organisations, groups protesting against racist or sexual abuses, and other forms of local self-organisation’ (Žižek, 2007, 7). Unfortunately, Žižek appears deeply confused as to the nature and form of these widely varied groups. His confusion probably arises from the dual aspects of their resistance. On one side they are against global capitalism and for an ethically-based green life-style with all the vagueness and contradiction which that often involves. There are echoes of the counter-culture and alternative life-style politics of the1960s in all this. But on the other side, these ‘new resisters’ have been very precisely focussed on specific targets using methods of relentless pressure backed by impressive (if not always entirely objective) research, media-savviness and, ultimately, often courageous civil disobedience. Intellectually – and this may be what upsets Žižek – the roots of this form of resistance are more anarchist than socialist though the clearest immediate lineage is the Greenham women and the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. (To read about this new anarchism with all its insights and problems, the last issue *Renewal* (15.4) provides a good starting point). To suggest, as Žižek does, that they do not confront the state all down the line is obvious nonsense. If anything the reverse is true: they have been the only agents to stand up to an increasingly centralised and authoritarian state over the last twenty years. What they have not done is interest themselves in electoral democracy on the not unreasonable grounds that it amounts to a choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

The need for new coalitions

The combined effect of the failure of the historically important agents of social democracy, and the relative success of the new resistance, is to give those who wish to revitalise social democracy a real problem as to how to proceed in concrete political terms. This is not a problem that can be solved by the metaphors which, as I began by noting, too often pass for political analysis on the left. Martin McIvor's ultimate reliance 'on actors in civil society' (McIvor, 2007, 10) is another such. Social democrats quite clearly need to start talking the language of political coalition.

This is a language long disdained and dismissed by a political group accustomed to being the controlling force within the wider progressive left. In Geoff Eley's words, writing about the European left:

> For roughly a century between the 1860s and the 1960s, the socialist tradition exercised a long-lasting hegemony over the Left's effective presence … If the Left was always larger than socialism … socialist parties also remained at their indispensable core. (Eley, forthcoming)

In Britain, the membership of the Labour Party formed this indispensable socialist core of that broader left (7). That is no longer true. The Labour government is clearly standing firm on the centre-right platform it has constructed since 1997 and has reduced the independent role of the Labour Party to occasional electoral foot-slogging. The British left, including social democrats, has found refuge in a wide variety of political formations in some of which it has actually been rather more effective in promoting what amounts to a social-democratic agenda than inside the Labour Party (8). Yet the dominant political language of most overt social democrats remains stuck in, at best, the 1970s, with its ever more desperate hopes that something can be done to influence the leadership of the Labour Party.

The current political situation in Britain is febrile and unstable. The unitary British state is falling apart in a slow-motion collapse; the electoral system of the national parliament grossly distorts voters' choices and is in danger of losing legitimacy; the two dominant parliamentary parties essentially occupy the same ground whilst striving to magnify their difference; apparent economic success has nevertheless created a social malaise of growing proportions; the extreme economic liberalism of successive governments has left Britain more exposed to international financial winds than any other European nation; draconian measures to curtail civil liberties are legislated at regular intervals justified by a terrorist threat far less serious and much less competent than that mounted by the IRA. There is a real threat that out of this will emerge an authoritarian government largely divorced from any electoral process or at the very least relying on a limited and coerced version of it. Most of these developments are widely unpopular yet the coalition of forces necessary to oppose them remains far out of reach. A good measure of just how far is the obvious political truth that the one political grouping to which Brown pays no attention, indeed treats with contempt, is the left of his own party. There are essentially two reasons for this situation.

First, the two-party dominance of British politics, based upon a rigid class division with no significant regional, religious or ethnic divisions to support other party groups, has been in place so long that any other form of political governance seems unthinkable. This domination is clearly starting to breakdown. The three Celtic nations are well along a nationalist road whilst George Galloway's extraordinary election may presage some ethnic electoral re-alignment (something which Rachel Briggs' analysis rather sidesteps – Briggs, 2007). However, in England, even the rise of a third party as a genuine electoral alternative, albeit in a minority of parliamentary seats, has failed to dent significantly the dominant mindset of British social democracy: that political normality is when one of two parties has a comfortable majority and that anything else threatens to loose the anarchy of unstable government. It is curious that this attitude seems so dominant amongst social democrats given that, historically, it was a social-democratic fraction which, by forging the SDP-Liberal alliance, lifted Britain's third party from hovering around the ten per cent level to an electoral threshold of around twenty per cent.

The second, more practical, reason is that the fragmentation of the left amongst several parties and a multitude of non-affiliated pressure groups means that there is simply no single unifying force able to divert party activists from their chosen vehicle, environmental and other activists from their chosen issue nor to rouse the disillusioned and dispirited of the left who probably outnumber both kinds of activist put together. Electoral reform is one obvious and potentially very popular line. However, the anarchist genetics of the new resisters gives them a not wholly irrational suspicion of electoral politics for its own sake whilst, inexplicably, the old Labour left remains hostile to any form of proportional representation. Perhaps more than anything else, this hostility is an example of the 1970s mindset when any hint of such reform was seen as a manoeuvre by the right to cheat Labour of its rightful inheritance. It is really only New Labour which has even begun to move on from this position. Blair drew back from the brink but it is just possible that Brown and his acolytes might see a promise to hold a referendum on electoral reform as the only way to win the next election. And they might just be right.

It is an odd paradox that, just when the firm shift of a hollowed-out Labour Party to the centre-right is acknowledged to leave a gaping hole on the left of British politics, the British left in its various guises seems unable to begin even to contemplate the agency which might form to fill the hole. Perhaps the best that can be hoped is that in a political context which is so unstable and fast-moving, shifts and changes outside the left can prompt the necessary hard thinking required to negotiate a new coalition of forces. The best hopes for a starting point for this may be in Scotland and Wales where the process has already begun. Meanwhile, the least we can do is to learn how to talk the talk.

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Notes

1. I am going to use 'left' as a convenient name for social democrats and socialists (insofar as there is any distinction) as well as a wider grouping for which there is no other convenient name whilst recognising that there remains an unanswered question as to just how to define this group.
2. This is a very simple encapsulation of a political dispute which has festered in Labour circles ever since.
3. None of this should be seen as an endorsement of the trio's subsequent politics. But the fact that they gained popular support quite unlike that for any other Labour leader of the time is significant.
4. Even in the mid-90s, less than twenty-five per cent of those polled thought privatisation a good thing (Jenkins, 2006, 105).
5. None of the left participants in the two parallel conflicts from Scargill to Kinnock and, for that matter, the young Blair and Brown would ever, at the time, have called themselves social democrats rather than socialists.
6. In 2006, union membership was 24 per cent amongst employees aged 25-34 years and 39 per cent amongst employees over 50 years old.
7. We prefer here to refer to socialism as a term encompassing both social-democratic and Marxist groupings. This is historically accurate.
8. The Liberal Democrat, Green and Scottish Nationalist parties have clearly advanced programmes close to forms of social democracy.