Putting the critical into 'critical friend'

Sally Davison, Sue Goss, Neal Lawson and Paul Thompson

On *Renewal's* thirtieth anniversary, its founding editorial team and original publisher reflect on the history of the journal, its attitude to both the New Labour and Corbyn projects, and the role it can play in the current very different political circumstances.

Sally Davison: To me, the purpose of *Renewal* is clear. It's a place where you can talk seriously about Labour Party politics. Labour is so short of forums for the discussion of ideas. It doesn't have a publisher, it hasn't really got any journals. So, *Renewal* performs a very valuable function. But within that, it provides a space for thinking critically. Clearly, whether Labour is in or out of power makes a big difference to a journal of discussion, so over the years its remit has necessarily changed. I would say its role today is more to be a forum for discussion between different voices, whereas when it first started it was more of a political project. In that sense, it has changed quite a bit. But its foundational purpose remains to be a forum where people can talk in a non-sectarian and hopefully pluralist way about issues important to Labour.

Neal Lawson: I agree. The reason we started was to create that space, because there was a gap in the market for what Sally has just described. But I'm not sure if the problem now is a lack of platforms. Platforms are much easier now than they were in 1993: everyone can have a Substack or a Twitter feed. I don't think the problem now is so much one of finding a platform – although of course we all hanker for the twenty-first-century version of *Marxism Today*. The problem is the ideas, and the link between ideas and a working, constructive, critical relationship with the Labour Party. Back then, there were ideas, there was big thinking. The remnants of *Marxism Today* were involved, and there were also people in senior leadership positions in

the Labour Party who were interested in ideas. That's one of the things that I think is different from today. By ideas, I don't just mean policy or electoral strategy, I mean strategic, theoretical and practical thinking, and the link between the three. Today, we're struggling on that. The other difference is that when the journal started it was organically linked to the 'soft left', through the remnants of the Labour Coordinating Committee. There was, at that time, a very identifiable soft left. That is possibly still true – but it is pretty soft and not very left. It's also pretty silent. It isn't operating in the space of strategic ideas that we did in '93.

I'm really pleased the journal is still around thirty years on, because it's really needed. But what ideas is it tapping into? And what's its mechanism for translating them into Labour politics? There aren't many people left with the capability, capacity, interest, enthusiasm, motivation, to be involved in the debates that the journal still engages with. Someone like Ed Miliband really stands out like a rock as the tide recedes.

Paul Thompson: As the chapter by the current editors of *Renewal* in Nathan Yeowell's edited collection *Rethinking Labour's Past* [Bloomsbury 2022, reprinted in this volume] makes clear, there are obviously continuities in ideas, organisations, and the question around whether the journal can make a difference to debates and outcomes. But I was really struck by their argument that the journal's relationship with New Labour, in our era, and its later relationship with Corbyn's party, were analogous projects, in the sense that *Renewal* tried to be a critical friend to the two regimes. And by the contrast they draw between New Labour as all strategy and no ideas, and Corbynism as all ideas and no strategy. I'm wholly unconvinced by that.

To go back to the original setting up of the journal, one of the key differences is that Neal and I would use those editorials in a very interventionist way, almost as a running commentary, very explicitly directed at political positions. Neal's also right that there is undoubtedly more debate, and more platform, now. We were more prominent for that reason. There are better debates now, and the journal is a better journal in terms of its capacity to engage people to write, and the range of debates. I don't think it's as effective politically.

Sue Goss: I recently opened my copy of the very first issue, and in it there was a handwritten draft of a letter I'd written to David Putnam, clearly trying to sell him a subscription to the journal. And it said: 'the intention is to create a journal of Labour politics committed to the project of electing a Labour government, but able to provide a vigorous debate around political goals, policies and processes, and to create dialogue between, and analysis from, different parties, groups of movements on the democratic left.' So, I don't think it was ever *just* a strategic project. Yes, the project was to elect a Labour government, but way back then we were also talking about pluralism and the relationships between political parties, about inviting people in.

Looking back at some of the articles from the very early days, it all feels very familiar. I discovered my first article was about PR, and how it wasn't about pacts, it was about changing the electoral system to make it fair, and other articles were about the role of the voluntary sector and the changing role of the state, and then about language and the thought police, and how people feel excluded by the policing of identity. And then I was writing about the wider democratic project, associated with Charter 88. These are the same things that we're talking about now. We were also trying to separate ourselves from Militant and a Labour Party that was quite workerist, and unpleasant, and hectoring. And here we go again. I suppose I thought back then that the Labour Party was listening more, or that there were more ways to be heard within the Labour Party.

The other thing I now see is there were there were two different modernising projects, and we thought – although probably I was more naive than Paul on this – that our modernising project might win. And that was based on pluralism and the complexities of a participatory democracy. Meanwhile, the Blair project was gaining strength and bringing in contracting and privatisation, and we all know where that went. But that modernising project that we were articulating then, with some refinement and some changes, is the modernising project that many of us are still working on now. We failed to get anyone to listen to us, and so we're still having the same arguments. But it might be easier now because the right neoliberal alternative is so spectacularly failing, so it may be that there's more space.

There's certainly no shortage of ideas. When you go into a bookshop now, there are whole sections of books on ideas. They maybe aren't labelled as 'politics', but they are dealing with feminism, with climate change, with anti-racism. There's a hunger for ideas. And the ideas are there. It's the Labour project part of it that's missing. That's not where it's happening. If you're a Labour Party member in a local ward, it is very hard to have a clue, unless you are reading and engaging in other ways. So, it's not that there aren't those debates, it's that somehow the Labour Party is left out of them. We no longer have that direct dialogue with the leadership. Robin Cook was such an important connector in those early days. But don't forget that in one of the first issues, Blair was writing to justify and try to sell his modernising project to us. I can't imagine the same today.

SD: The thing is that Blair, for all his, in my view, terribleness, was very interested in ideas. He was looking for ideas, for things he could use – although that isn't to say he listened carefully to everything that was said. But he was looking for things to draw on. And as the current editors say in the chapter referred to by Paul [see above], when Miliband was in office that was good for the journal too, because again you had a leader who was interested in ideas. But I don't think that Starmer is very interested in ideas, and I don't think Corbyn was either, because he already

knew all the answers from long ago. When the Labour Party leadership is actually looking for ideas, that makes it much easier for the journal to have a relationship, but when they aren't it is very much harder.

PT: Although I think it's wrong to say New Labour was all strategy and no ideas, it's also true that (as the journal at the time never tired of saying) they were focused on having a strategy to win, not a strategy to govern. The worst statement Blair ever came out with was 'we won as New Labour, and we will govern as New Labour'. They completely failed to understand that a new world had opened up with that landslide victory. The journal did have a couple of opportunities to push our modernising strategy. One was around the period just before the election victory, when there was a debate around stakeholding and the Third Way. But we failed, despite all our efforts. The second was in 2003, when New Labour was clearly running short of ideas and they asked us to put on a seminar, and again they listened, and just didn't do it. But I think the point was not that they weren't interested in ideas, but they already had ideas. As far as I can tell, their ideas derived from three different sources. One was a very optimistic pro-globalisation perspective, associated with people like Anthony Giddens. The second was another very optimistic, more economically-oriented set of ideas around the knowledge economy. Both of these were influenced by the right wing of *Marxism Today*, and the belief in post-Fordism, which was a ludicrous fantasy, but which a lot of people wanted to believe. The third set of ideas were the adaptations to neoliberalism, which were being pushed by people like Julian Le Grand, which was to do public sector reform by introducing more markets. My point is that there wasn't a shortage of ideas, but that they were bad ideas. And if there's an analogy to Corbynism, it's not that Corbyn was all ideas, but that his weren't good ideas either.

SG: In the case of public sector reform, there was a very clear set of ideas, and they weren't all bad. The idea that you pump money into the public sector, but you win over the middle classes by giving them more choice of service provision and making it more responsive, is not altogether bad. It's just that the marketisation went too far and wasn't properly thought through. Some of the markets in the public sector have made things better; some of them have made things worse. In the '83-'93 period, we were dealing with a very producer-captured set of public services, which were run for the workers by the workers. But nobody gave a shit about the customers. That was true, and it needed addressing. It's just that the way it was addressed was wrong. And now, the customers are treated worse than they were, because the private sector cares even less.

I now realise the importance of balance. You have to see the downside of different reforms and bring that into your thinking. A bit of competition did no harm, too much competition does a lot of harm. The over-optimism that Paul mentioned

meant that there was faith that these ideas somehow would work without having a downside. But there is always a downside, and you have to manage it. Although we probably didn't do it very well at the time, the journal is very well positioned to do this. It can step back and say: 'we are dealing with this complex ecosystem, and if you do more of this good thing, you will get these problematic counter effects, and this is how you can mitigate them'. Simply saying: 'everything the Tories say is crap', doesn't work, because the electorate can see the value of some of the things that they're trying to do, or at least understand why they're trying to do them. The Humble Government project, which I'm enjoying being part of, starts from the assumption that governments don't always know best, can't always get it right, and have to be very careful when they intervene. The principal way that governments intervene is by changing the nature of the economy in which the intervention is happening. By regulating, redistributing or moving resource around they change the context in which all the other players are working, rather than trying to invent a policy that will just put a finger in the dyke. Changing the way that governments think about policies is as important as having a policy.

So, on the one hand, the ideas were not nuanced enough. There wasn't enough concern with how they would impact the whole policy landscape. But on the other hand, they were also too timid. There were whole areas of social policy where we should have gone further and faster, and where democratic change didn't happen. Some of the ideas that were lined up, and that Tony Blair had supported in 1997, got dropped because he thought he didn't need them. And that was because he wasn't seeing the world as it was moving; he was only seeing the world as it had been when he started.

NL: My view, and we said it in the journal, is that New Labour wasn't new enough and it wasn't Labour enough. That was that was our line. But it was a project born out of weakness: the weakness of the labour movement compared to the strength of capital. The capacity of the forces of labour to counteract those of capital had been massively, massively reduced. The context was a deep low after '92. We'd already seen the loss of the miners' strike, and the loss of capacity, of municipal socialism, of the labour movement more generally, the decline of the Communist Party, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. All of that. We went from that low to losing the election, which was the catalyst for the emergence of the journal. And then we went into an era of quite ridiculous hype and hope within a few years. I think that says as much about Blair's ability to crystallise that moment, and to be the showman, as it does about the strength of the party.

The journal always operated in a number of different tempos. Paul was calm, measured and considered. And I was bouncing around like a bloody lunatic, either thinking everything was great, or everything was terrible. Between us, and the rest

of the editorial team, we covered the scope of things. But that context – that switch from despair to a kind of ridiculous hope – is important. And the ideas that Paul highlighted – books like *Living on Thin Air* – were very important influences on the New Labour project.[1]

Could we ever look into Blair's or Brown's heart and say: given another set of social, economic and contextual forces, to counter the City, Murdoch, the USA, would you have done different things? I think they would always say: let's bend things as much as possible, without scaring the horses. But they were products of the material conditions of the time, which was a thoroughgoing weakness of that Labourist project. And today, as Sue has said, the energy in society for change, both the organisational energy and the intellectual energy, is not associated with the Labour Party like it was in that '92 to '97 period. That's why when I look at it now, and I'm really trying to see every angle, I just think: if they get over the line first, how on earth is this one going to fly? I really struggle to see it.

PT: The reason why our version of modernisation didn't make the impact it should have is because the leaders of the New Labour project thought that the forces of contemporary British society and British capitalism were already modernising in a way which was favourable to a social-democratic project. I don't think we ever fully understood that, so it was an unequal battle. They were convinced that they didn't need an alternative modernising project, because the tide of history was flowing in a social-democratic direction, through the knowledge economy, globalisation and so on. Even if you take Brown, who believed in redistribution and equality, he was convinced that the knowledge economy and financialised capitalism would sort everything out, and that he could just redistribute the benefits from that. That turned out to be key, because when he got the chance to govern, he was carrying so much baggage from the failures of those policies that, when the financial crash hit, despite the fact that he heroically offset some of the processes, the politics were gone. There was no way that we were going to win the 2010 election with that kind of baggage. Like I say, they had their modernising project. And it was deeply flawed.

SG: If we look at the appetite for similar ideas today, it's true that no one in Labour, except possibly Ed Miliband, is articulating an alternative. But it is being articulated in social-democratic parties in Europe. I am also reasonably hopeful about the constitutional reforms recently proposed by Brown and Starmer.[2] If they have understood that decentralisation is not simply a marginal thing, but that if you put power in a different place it will work differently, and if they've understood why centralisation fails, then that would be a big shift. I don't know that they've made that shift, but they are talking the talk, and in the rest of Europe that shift is being taken very seriously.

Labour has always failed in two ways. One is that it thinks that centralisation and pulling levers works. Whereas, above and beyond a few really big things like nationalisation and banning smoking, it generally doesn't. But the other is this timidity in believing that the people are to the right of anything the Labour Party might want to do, and that there is no possibility of support for radicalism – unless it's the radical right. Somehow there is support for radical right thinking, but there isn't the possibility of support for radical left thinking, because its associated with Corbyn and Militant. Sensible radical left thinking doesn't get heard as much as it could and should be, and as it is heard in other countries. It's important to look internationally because that's a way of getting people to see that it can be done, and it can work, and it's not daft.

SD: My memory is that the first Blair government wasn't as bad as the next two because it was inheriting a whole tranche of social-democratic ideas that had been developed by a wide range of people. But Blair and his tiny clique were right-wing, in that they actually believed that neoliberal solutions could work. (I'm not sure that Brown had the same approach.) To me, one of the problems with the Labour Party is that it's so susceptible to capture. Because of the structure of the party – and the British electoral system – a tiny group of people at the centre had this immense control. And as their control increased, the programme became less and less social-democratic, and more and more neoliberal. Blair and Mandelson took Labour in a very defeatist direction. Not only because, as Sue says, they think that no one will ever want radical ideas, but because they didn't have any radical ideas anyway. It suited them to say their hands were tied. That did great damage to the left both within the party and more widely. We're still living with that inheritance.

NL: I don't know how right-wing they are, it's hard to look into their hearts. But this is why it's so analogous to now. That was what they thought could be done. We're in the same position now: we have to win, and these are the limits of what we can do, we'll sort everything else out afterwards. That tension is there all the time. But the intellectual, organisational and cultural forces around Labour are so much weaker now. Labour then was much more expansive, imaginative and creative.

We also need to think about the benign conditions in which New Labour came to power: sixty consecutive quarters of growth. That meant there were very few distributional tensions. Now there are these excruciating distributional pressures, dilemmas, tensions, and we don't have anything like the intellectual, ideological and pluralist base to deal with them. Whatever you think about New Labour – and there was an element of control freakery – they engaged with us, they *wanted* to engage. They wrote in *Marxism Today*, and were involved in organisations like Demos. That's completely opposite to where we are today, which is trying to control everything and dampen everything down. There are similarities, but there are big

differences, and the big differences really worry me. I am extremely worried about where this ends up. If it goes wrong – whether that means losing, or whether it means winning and failing – the possible consequences take my breath away.

SG: There still seems to be a failure to engage with a wider cross-section of experts and intellectuals to tackle the big social problems. At least the Blair project did engage with academics and experts. If you look at something like rent control, which is a no-brainer for any modern democracy, they are not proposing ways to do this and yet there are plenty of people out there that would sort it out for them. But they don't seem to be asking anymore.

PT: I don't agree. The idea that the current Labour leadership has no policy is really nonsense. There's the Brown-inspired project, the work that the party's done on work and employment rights, the Green New Deal. There are radical policies and there is potential, but as Neal said, the environment is so tough now, so much less benign, that I'm not wholly convinced that they're realisable in these circumstances. It's also true that the ideas have not yet been tied together in a way that looks like a winning strategy. But I'm a bit more optimistic about the policy possibilities. I certainly wouldn't write them off.

SD: We've been talking about energy. And the good thing about the Corbyn era was that it did bring in a lot of younger people with lots of energy and ideas. For once, you could be in the Labour Party and be left-wing and that wasn't weird. Out of that period came a lot of ideas, like adopting the Green New Deal. But I don't think Corbyn knew how to harness that energy and make it into a project. And when he went, because a lot of those younger people didn't have other experiences of how politics works, and how hard it can be, they were incredibly disillusioned. The Labour Party under Corbyn had this massive influx of young, left-wing people, wanting to get involved. There was a fantastic amount of energy, and now it's nearly all gone – or at least has gone away from Labour.

PT: That's one interpretation of it, which I think misleading. And I think *Renewal* made the wrong call on Corbyn. Of course, the journal couldn't simply be oppositional. Pathways had to be open, and the journal had to be, in some respect, a critical friend. But it was a lot more friend than critical. All the way through the history of the journal, there's been a question about whether we are actually making a difference on the things we think we are. This is recurrent: our project versus New Labour's project; was the Miliband period really as congenial as the editor then thought? I doubt it, personally. In the Corbyn years, the journal made a massive deal of the new political economy. I've been pushing new political economy longer than I can remember, and I am very supportive of the things the journal was trying to do. However, I think it vastly overestimated the significance of those initiatives to the Corbyn project, as it acknowledged in its editorial after the 2019 defeat, which noted

the surprising absence of 'Corbynomics' in the 2019 election – not just in the manifesto, but the whole process. The other thing it vastly overestimated was the significance of Momentum, and the extent to which it represented a new kind of politics, as opposed to a new machine for running the party. It overestimated the extent to which The World Transformed had any relationship to transforming the world.

This meant that it didn't ask any really tough questions about the fact that Corbynism was completely uninterested in the actually-existing electorate, and basically had a project of developing a vanguard party which just aggregated all the radical demands of single-issue groups. It did not have a strategy; at least New Labour had a strategy for winning over the electorate. The journal also said very little about foreign policy. You've only got to look at Corbyn's current positions on the war in Ukraine to see the damage that he and his team were doing. If Corbyn was leader of the Labour Party now, we would be calling for the *de facto* surrender of Ukraine, which is the current Stop the War coalition position. Yes, the journal did have to be a critical friend to Corbynism because that was the position we were in. But the balance was wrong. The post-2019 editorial concluded that as a result of the election we were back in 1993. In my view, we were back in 1983: a far-left leadership had led us into complete disaster, and we had to rebuild in very difficult circumstances. But we're also far luckier, because the external situation and the fact that the Tories have crashed the British economy have created a situation in which we've jumped to 1993 in terms of the economic circumstances. It was a long road back from 1983, and thankfully we don't necessarily have to go down it again.

NL: It's always a tight-rope walk for the soft left, in terms of that critical-friend role -- how critical, and how friendly? I think the journal over-egged support for New Labour; I think it over-egged support for Corbyn. I don't really understand what its relationship is with Starmer. I don't see any sign of it going over-the-top in support, but I would definitely counsel a cautious approach. As Paul said, there is some interesting policy stuff there – work out where the gaps are in that. What are the big, imponderable, difficult, long-term structural things that need to be done?

PT: To end on a more positive note about the journal, I do think it's now engaging with a wider range of people and debates. It has been a remarkable survivor, and it's not just surviving, it is still flourishing.

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Notes

1 Charles Leadbeater, *Living on Thin Air: The New Economy*, Viking, London 1999.
2 Commission on the UK's Future, *A New Britain: renewing our democracy and rebuilding our economy*, Labour Party, London 2022.