

A relaunched *Renewal*

Renewal is relaunching in a time of contradictions. Labour is back in government with a strong mandate, but its first months in government have been uneasy. In Britain and worldwide, social democratic parties face the rise of the far right. Under our editorship we will make the case for a realistic, clear-sighted, and ideologically confident social democracy fit to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Renewal is relaunching in a strange political moment. In some ways, social democrats here in the UK are in a stronger position than we have been in years. Labour is in power with a commanding majority, and is implementing ambitious policies on housing, climate, and workers' rights. After years of electoral defeat, and a prolonged period of chaotic Tory rule which saw the wilful destruction of much of our public realm, Labour now has a genuine chance to 'fix the foundations' and bring about a 'decade of national renewal'.

But domestically, despite the solidity of its mandate and the promise of its programme, the beginning of Labour's tenure in government has been uneasy. The Starmer government has been caught in avoidable scandal and ill-handled argument. Without a clear sense of direction, it increasingly seems to be at the mercy of events, while the party machine has been rigid and anti-pluralist, gratuitously alienating many on the left and the soft left.

Moreover, the broader picture for social democracy is difficult in the extreme. Internationally, political momentum is with the right and far right who continue to capitalise on rampant social, cultural and economic alienation, and on the

political disaffection of electorates. Technological revolutions controlled by tech giants have drastically changed the mechanics of public discourse, creating the conditions for the emergence of new forms of reactionary politics. Gangster capitalism and populist ethnonationalism operate in increasingly close alliance, and oligarchical regimes now hold power not only in Putin's Russia and Xi's China, but also in Trump's America. On the European continent, EU institutions provide the flimsiest of shields for democratic norms and practices, while the vote-shares of our sister parties across Europe and beyond, often seem in terminal decline.

To confront this political moment, social democrats will need two things: an intellectual openness to new ideas, and a clear-sighted analysis of the political terrain which distinguishes between our allies and our opponents.

Renewal is now subtitled 'a journal of social democracy', but in its early years the subtitle read 'a journal of Labour politics'. Despite the change, now as ever this remains a Labour-aligned and Labour supporting publication, viewing the party as the only serious vehicle for the advancement of social democracy in Britain. This support does not mean that under our editorship you will not read criticism – indeed, the pages of *Renewal* will undoubtedly, when necessary, feature harsh criticism, from a variety of directions – of Labour policies, politicians, and pronouncements. What you will not read, however, is lazy and disingenuous criticism of the kind that pervades much of the media, monsterring versions of Labour that bear little or misleading resemblance to the party that actually exists.

Our vision of social democracy, however, is not one that limits itself to party politics or to the technicalities of policymaking. Rather, we believe in a holistic social democracy capable of speaking to all aspects of our public and private lives – as a moral creed, as a democratic philosophy, and as a social ethos. *Renewal's* strength has always been its pluralism and eclecticism, bridging journalism, politics, think tanks and academia. That will not change: our output and contributors will continue to discuss everything from social security to social media trends, from geopolitics to literature and music. We want *Renewal* to be a place where people think seriously about all of policy, politics, economics and culture – and the connections between them – from a distinctively and unapologetically social democratic perspective.

Indeed, an overly narrow focus on policymaking and electioneering has all too often allowed social democrats to cede ground ideologically – to hectoring and individualistic liberalisms, to closed and nostalgic conservatisms, or to performative cultural radicalisms, all aided by attendant media organisations and hyperactive online influencers. Social democrats must distinguish themselves from, and when necessary, criticise those to our right and left. It does us no credit to outsource sections of our political thinking either to a sclerotic liberalism

preoccupied with abstruse and inaccessible language games, nor to authoritarian leftisms with cynical and outdated geopolitical ideas and a dogmatic, anti-pluralist ethic. These people can be our allies in the fight against the global far-right, but their politics are not ours, and it does us no credit to delegate sections of our political thinking and positioning to them.

What *Renewal* believes is that a re-invigorated social democracy is now more necessary than ever. We understand our creed not as the ambivalent shrug of the centre-left, but as a distinct and storied ideological tradition – informed intellectually by Marxist, Fabian, communitarian, and ethical-socialist thought, and practically by the longstanding and ongoing efforts of socialist parties and labour movements the world over. Each of us has our own perspective, and under our editorship *Renewal* will continue to be a space where different traditions and philosophies can encounter each other honestly.

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Renewal's relaunch issue addresses some of the challenges currently facing social democrats in Britain – both in the form of practical policy problems confronting the government, and broader ideological challenges posed by our opponents – as well as what we can learn from strategies adopted elsewhere.

The Labour government's first months in office have required it to respond to new paradigms in technology, social policy, and governance. In UK policy terms, Eleanor Shearer and Matt Davies make the case for a progressive approach to AI which resists upwards redistribution of control and power to tech monopolies, in order to serve, rather than hollow out, public services and the economy. Alex Porter considers the egalitarian purpose behind new investments in childcare, pointing the way towards policies that support social cohesion in addition to labour force participation. And in a major interview, Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham reflects on what his local experiences can teach Labour about governing at the national level, the policies that can deliver the most concrete change, and the role of municipal government in restoring citizens' sense of agency. Above all, Burnham argues that as socialists and social democrats we must be more forthright in our convictions, and more comfortable with ideological argument, if we want to galvanise and not just assuage a disillusioned electorate.

The government's policy agenda is defined and shaped by the foundations that it has inherited. In a roundtable which develops the themes of their new collection, *Britain Needs Change*, Gerry Hassan, Ann Pettifor, Sue Goss and Andrew Gamble identify the obstacles facing the Labour government. Reflecting on the current dysfunctionality of Westminster politics, they argue that national renewal will require not just policy ambition, but a critical perspective on the outdated

constitutional, economic, and geopolitical narratives and institutions that continue to dominate public discourse. Without changing the foundations of state and statecraft, progressive change will be frustrated and constrained.

We must also guard against accepting the wrong foundations. The economic historian Jim Tomlinson dissects an important example of how flawed and misleading economic narratives continue to pose a grave danger to social democratic policymaking. Reviewing 'Foundations' – a report on Britain's economic weakness recently published by a clique of right-wing think-tankers – Tomlinson highlights the historical illiteracy and disingenuous use of data that underpin this effort to revive Thatcherite economic analyses.

To avoid falling into our opponents' intellectual traps, we need to understand their arguments, and the longer traditions of thought they draw upon. Social democratic governance today contends with an entrenched, empowered, and ascendant far right. Two contributions delve deeper into the origins of the conservative enemy. In an interview with the political theorist Steven Klein, the American writer John Ganz discusses his work on the rise of the techno-libertarian right which now finds its champion in Donald Trump. Ganz and Klein discuss how Trumpism, which threatens not just the foundations of American democracy, but also the post-war international order, is premised on an awkward coalition of populist economic nationalists and free market libertarians that began forming in the early 1990s.

The nature of such reactionary coalitions is further explored by the intellectual historian Sam Pallis, in his assessment of Kemi Badenoch's leadership election pamphlet 'Conservatism in Crisis: The Rise of the Bureaucratic Class'. Pointing to its origins in the so-called 'new class theories' that became fashionable after the Second World War, Pallis suggests that Badenoch is attempting to import an American discourse of anti-globalism in order to paper over the fundamental tensions between market and nation that dog her brand of 'libertarian nationalism'.

We should not make the mistake, however, of treating the right and far-right as the protagonists of contemporary politics, or their victories as in any way inevitable. In this issue, Morgan Jones speaks to Marie Sherlock, a newly elected Irish Labour TD, who managed to defeat a high-profile alleged crime lord to win her seat in last November's Irish general election. To accompany analyses of Trumpism, Mike Williams, of the Centre for American Progress, offers a sober – and sympathetic – reassessment of 'Bidenomics'. Rather than dismissing the Biden administration's ambitious green industrial policies in light of Trump's victory, he suggests that they would have been more electorally impactful if implemented earlier and accompanied by social legislation like child tax credits.

This argument for ambition chimes with the analysis offered by David Cesar Heymann in his account of the success of Pedro Sánchez in reviving the fortunes of social democracy in Spain. Crucially, Cesar Heymann points to Sánchez's clear record of not only policy achievements (including major labour market reforms, progressive taxation, and symbolic anti-fascist measures) but also to his willingness to respond to setbacks by taking substantial political risks. Sánchez offers a model of a social democratic government that is politically and ideologically self-confident, and which has no hesitations about delivering aggressively on its agenda.

As Marie Sherlock highlights in this issue, these are times of both alienation and opportunity. Social democracy, by definition, has always required regeneration and renewal in the face of changing economic, sociological, and geopolitical realities. In Britain and elsewhere, progressive policies must be based on a realistic and informed analysis of the technological, economic, and geopolitical context in which they are applied, in order for more abstract goals, like growth, to benefit the many. The Starmer government's mandate, used effectively, can allow it to model a social democratic programme both rooted in the realities of the present, and paving the way towards another future. The global rise of the far right has come at the cost of social democratic parties' vote share, but the forces of the right are also divided, and the aggression and chaos of the Trump administration is laying bare the inadequacy of much of the contemporary conservative worldview. Opportunity, for social democrats, lies not in accommodation with the right, but in a muscular defence of our institutions, values, and vision.

This is not a time for complacency. Under our editorship, *Renewal* will be a space for social democrats to explore the political realities with self-confidence and intellectual rigour. We are clear-eyed about the dangers ahead but remain convinced that a radical and emancipatory vision of social democracy can still be realised in the twenty-first century. We hope that you will join us.

Lise Butler, Jack Jeffrey, Morgan Jones, and David Klemperer are the new co-editors of *Renewal*.