



Labour's new thinking: rather better than I feared

The Shape of Things to Come: Labour's New Thinking

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The one advantage of being in opposition is that it gives political parties time to think. For parties of the centre-left, even more than for parties of the centre-right, that thinking time is vital. Parties of the centre-left need to come at their electorate promising change that is both progressive and relevant. So to make that promise work, centre-left parties need a very clear sense of what might be relevant and how the changes they propose can be progressive. It is rarely enough for such parties to get by simply by criticising the government. All opposition parties have to do that, of course, and if the government is as ineffectual as the present one, the temptation must always be there on the opposition front-bench to play safe, to emphasise the negative, and to give few detailed hostages to fortune. But the huge drawback of doing only that is that, in the wake of electoral victory, the incoming government will possess neither the progressive programme it needs nor the popular support to sustain that programme against the resistance it will inevitably meet. Power won in that manner tends to be both short-lived and unsatisfactory – ask the Callaghan Government – leaving its time in office as merely a precursor to the return of a yet more powerful conservatism. It is to Ed Miliband's credit that he is visibly not seeking an electoral victory of the Callaghan variety: that he is instead trying to put detailed flesh on his commitment to the creation of a 'responsible capitalism.'

So how good is the new thinking? On the evidence of this collection, it is rather better than I feared. The collection brings together valuable essays on both dimensions of the Labour Party's current needs: essays on the underlying value-sets that can sustain its progressive commitments when in power, and detailed proposals on how to put those progressive values into play in ways relevant to modern conditions. In regard to the first of these, Will Hutton's essay is particularly important, and Marc Stears's report on Ed Miliband's value-set is genuinely reassuring. On the second, Kate Green's chapter is particularly telling: her willingness to anchor policy proposals on 'a new welfare bargain' is a clear recognition that the next Labour Government has to offer hard-pressed families the possibility of a new and less stressful work-life balance. So too is Rachel Reeves's essay on 'meeting the fiscal challenge' by building out from a guaranteed living wage and a serious policy assault on gross inequality. The next Labour Government will need to rebalance the economy, triggering the recreation of well-paying jobs outside a tightly regulated financial sector. The next Labour Government will need to put a real and solid floor under the incomes of even the poorest among us, and create easily accessible routes back to paid employment for those now trapped on welfare dependency for lack of employment



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opportunities. The next Labour Government will also need to create a generalised sense of empowerment and control in an economy and society now scarred by the concentration of power at the top and the absence of effective local democratic accountability. The essays in this collection by Chuka Umunna, Matthew Pennycook and Kitty Ussher all address one or more of those needs in ways that suggest the next Labour Government might yet be well-equipped to put its power to immediate progressive use.

Nonetheless, if this collection is any guide, this Labour Party rethink remains at best a job half-done. There is still so much more that needs adding to the mix. Four things at least that are missing here: the full articulation of the progressive value-set vital to sustain progressivism in power; a detailed specification of the dominant economic and social trends that the next Labour Government will have to bend; the integration of all these detailed proposals around a core set of immediate priorities; and the listing of the fundamental institutional changes that Labour in power will need to embed so deeply in UK economic and social life as to make their later removal close to impossible. Margaret Thatcher did the latter by using privatisation to so fragment public institutions and embed unregulated market mechanisms that New Labour left them all effectively unchallenged. 'Responsible capitalism' will need to be similarly embedded: in a new set of labour rights addressed to the daily needs of families struggling to combine paid work with the raising of children (a new family contract); and in a new set of governing institutions capable of subordinating short-term profit-taking to the requirements of long-term national economic growth (a new social compact). Elements of the family compact are here. Most of the social compact is not. Will Hutton's essay apart, there is little discussion in this collection about trade union power and industrial democracy, and nothing about tripartite planning or active regional policy. Let us hope that over the next eighteen months those gaps begin rapidly to be filled.

Then, one final need remains to be fulfilled – one not at all discussed here – the creation, well ahead of the election itself, of powerful popular support for the new Labour vision. The new leadership of the Labour Party may think time is on its side, but time can be wasted. Harold Wilson long ago, and Tony Blair more recently, spent the last eighteen months of their years in Opposition making a series of major policy statements and reframing the political debate on their terms, not Tory terms. To do that, Labour needs both its detailed vision and its popular support. It needs the first as quickly as possible, to give as much time as it can to the building of the second. The number of big Miliband speeches is beginning to grow: but there is no sense yet of a coherent programme that unites progressive values and detailed policies. The Labour Party under Ed Miliband's leadership is getting ever better at being an effective opposition to the Coalition. It has yet to demonstrate that it is also an alternative government in waiting. Collections like this provide much of the ammunition for that alternative. It needs now to be put together and then sold – really actively sold! (1)

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Reference

Coates, D. (2013) 'Labour after New Labour: escaping the debt', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15 (2013), forthcoming.

Note

1. This argument is developed more fully in Coates (2013).