

# DEBATE

## Does social democracy have a future? An exchange

Martin O'Neill and Neal Lawson

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**From:** Martin O'Neill

**To:** Neal Lawson

Dear Neal,

Right-wingers have long been sceptical about the role for the state, and have often attacked social democracy for giving the state too great a role in our lives. It's easy to see why those who want to give free rein to the unbridled market and who could not care less about growing inequalities want both to attack the role of the state and to profess the demise of social democracy. What seems like a curious development is that we are now hearing similar things from writers who identify with the left.

John Harris, in a recent piece in *Prospect* magazine, takes Ed Miliband's Labour Party to task for concentrating on policies – such as the abolition of the bedroom tax, the banning of zero-hour contracts, and the introduction of a mansion tax – that rely on 'an enduring belief in the capture of the centralised state', chiding the British left for being 'still wedded to a dreamy yearning for some crude replay of Clement Attlee's reforming Labour government of 1945-51' (Harris, 2014). Despite the fact that Compass, the campaigning organisation which you have chaired for the past decade and on whose management committee I have previously served, is itself committed to a number of plausible and attractive policies that one might describe as essentially 'statist' – from the nationalisation of the railways, to the more aggressive regulation of banking and finance, and the restriction of runaway executive pay – your own recent writing, and in particular your *New Statesman* piece which claims that 'social democrats face irrelevance at best, extinction at worst' (Lawson, 2014) has some close affinities with the perplexing position staked out by John Harris.

My own sense is that both you and Harris have committed an understandable but regrettable mistake; I think you've moved from a plausible critique of some things that New Labour did wrong – being too remote or technocratic or managerialist, and not paying sufficient attention to the values of participation and democracy – but you've then over-generalised from those more limited points to an exaggerated and puzzling critique of statist social democracy in general. You're throwing the baby out with the bathwater, and, as anyone with young children will tell you, that isn't a costless mistake to make. The positions that you and Harris are advocating – which are in some respects curiously reminiscent of David Cameron's 'Big Society' and of the Big Society's paper-thin and implausible theoretical foundations in Phillip Blond's 'Red Toryism' (see Blond, 2010) – are liable to have the effect of sapping Labour of the clarity of vision it needs for its next period in government and could, if given too much credence, undermine the real opportunity that the next Labour government has to create a much more egalitarian and democratic political economy in this country. If Labour is to succeed in the challenge that Ed Miliband has laid down to create a more equal society (see, for example, Ferguson and Miliband, 2014; Eaton and Wood, 2014; Wood, 2012), then it needs to be unembarrassed and forthright in using all the available levers of the British state to create a better society. Here I couldn't agree more with an observation of Chris Mullin's – it is often the right that does best at exercising power without apology, and this is a lesson that the left needs to learn (Mullin, 2013). The next Labour government will need to overcome the party's traditional timidity in acting resolutely to change the shape of the economy; the task at hand should be the important business of finding ways to use the power that the state possesses to create a country fit for its citizens, in which avoidable suffering is reduced, runaway inequality is curtailed, and the lives of the disadvantaged are significantly improved.

That's the general shape of our disagreement. Now, I don't think that you're wrong about the difficulties – generated by globalisation and political disaffiliation – that the left faces, but I do think you're wrong on the nature of the response that the left should make to these problems. You identify three 'challenges' to which the left must respond – these are a challenge 'to redefine the meaning of a good society', the challenge of internationalism, and what you describe as a 'cultural challenge' whereby 'social democrats are going to have to let go', to 'create platforms so that people can collectively change things for themselves' instead of 'pulling policy levers'.

Let me take these in turn. On the first, your call for a ‘post-materialist’ conception of the good is troubling in two ways. First, in a massively pluralistic society, in which people have a plethora of different values, I do not think it is any job of politicians or political parties to tell people what their conception of the good life should be like, or to chide them for their materialism. Unlike you, I don’t think there is anything wrong with working people having a nice television. Second, in an era where hundreds of thousands of people are reliant on food banks in order to avoid seeing their families starving, the idea that we have reached a period of ‘post-materialist’ politics beggars belief. Millions of our fellow citizens are in real material need, and it is one crucial job of politics to address those needs. I’m sure we don’t in fact disagree on that point.

On your remarks about internationalism, I fully agree that more needs to be done to stop the ‘race to the bottom’ of fiscal competition. You are right that it would be a good start if there were European harmonisation of corporate taxation rules, and more collaboration between international fiscal authorities. But note that these are recommendations about what ministers should do when they are in power. Rather than showing that statist social democracy is irrelevant, this challenge shows that collaboration between strong democratic states, each committed to taming and humanising the market, is a precondition for creating more liveable societies.

Your third point, about the need for politicians to ‘let go’ and give up on the idea of wielding power for the benefit of citizens, gets to the core of our disagreement. You think that the days of statist social democracy belong in the dustbin of history, and that the politics of the future is diffuse, decentralised and horizontal. But the decline of the state has been massively overplayed. What happened after the financial crisis? Neo-liberal states roared into life, spending *hundreds of billions* of pounds (and trillions of dollars) to save the financial system. As Will Davies nicely puts it, the financial crisis showed us that, despite neo-liberal avowals to the contrary, the ‘all-powerful sovereign state ... had been hovering in the background all along’ (Davies, 2014). Since the start of the financial crisis, the Bank of England has printed around £300 billion through its programme of quantitative easing, pumped directly through the veins of the diseased institutions that created the crisis in the first place, and which has ended up in the pockets of plutocrats, massively inflating the prices of the assets held by the financial elite at just the very moment that the poor are being subject to a campaign of austerity. Instead, what the left needs to do is to explain how that extraordinary level of power can be deployed for radical and egalitarian ends (see, e.g., Guinan, 2014). As it is, that power is too often used to

enrich those who are already grotesquely rich, while keeping the carcass of neoliberalism alive.

In your *New Statesman* essay, you say that ‘the way in which public finances have been used to bail out the banks at the expense of the people who are capitalism’s victims, proves the paucity of the social democrat position’. That is a non sequitur. We have not seen a social democratic response to the financial crisis, only an essentially neo-liberal one. That neo-liberal response showed how the power of the state could be deployed to reshape the economy, but it was not a deployment that was designed to help ordinary people. The inadequate response to the financial crisis shows the need for social democratic solutions, and the power of the state to enact them; it shows not that social democracy was tried and found wanting, but that it is badly needed, as much or even more than ever before.

It is the state – not ‘horizontal’ networks communicating via social media – that could restructure property or land taxation; or which could bring in a citizens’ basic income of the kind envisaged by Philippe Van Parijs or a basic capital holding of the sort endorsed by James Meade (see Van Parijs, 1997; Meade, 1964); which could transform our political economy through regional banks and a new approach to corporate taxation and corporate governance (see, e.g. O’Neill and Williamson, 2012a). It’s the state that could transform the plight of families through universal childcare or through Nordic-type regulation of parental leave. If we’re even to begin to think about the comprehensive overhaul of the fiscal system that Piketty has argued is a precondition for preventing a slide into a new and crueller level of inequality, what will be needed is for parties of the left to harness the full powers of the state (see Piketty, 2014; O’Neill, Pearce and Piketty, 2014). An attack on the very idea of using state power is the very last thing that we need.

Neo-liberalism pretended that the days of the state were gone, but then deployed state power ruthlessly, when circumstances demanded, to serve the interests of the very rich. The left should learn the lessons of what state power can achieve when wielded confidently, instead of colluding in a post-statist rhetoric that sometimes sounds indistinguishable from disingenuous Tory blather about the ‘Big Society’.

As I said at the beginning of this letter, you and the organisation that you chair, Compass, have been some of the staunchest defenders of innovative and radical policies for how the state can create a better and more equal society – curbing top pay, regulating corporate excesses, investing in green infrastructure and public transport, and so on. Policies such as these must be at the heart of any future

successful social democratic project. I'll hope to hear much more about such a project in the future, and know that you have much to contribute to it; the success of a new, radical and egalitarian political project would be the best possible practical refutation of your overdrawn worries about the death of social democracy.

With affection and best wishes,  
Martin

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**From:** Neal Lawson  
**To:** Martin O'Neill

Hello Martin,

Can I say what a pleasure it is to debate these issues with you – I much admire your thought and your all round niceness.

It made me smile that you jumped straight into a defence of the state – when that wasn't the central or only critique contained in my original essay in the *New Statesman* about a more general crisis, indeed a possible systematic crisis, of social democracy. You also lump me in with John Harris – though that's probably fair enough as John and I agree on a lot.

So for clarity – I think you can be constructively critical of the state as it actually is and want to reform it without being anti- state. That's where I feel I am. There are some around Labour, both Blairite and Blue, who can seem anti- state. You can debate them next after you've seen me off. I understand the instinct to defend the state under the weight of the neo-liberal onslaught and shout 'it's not the state wot done it' and yes the state has a critical role to play in the solutions to make our society better.

But, and this it seems to me is crucial, unless we understand why neo-liberalism is on top just when the state should be winning after the crash – then I'm not sure we are going to make the state any better. Here I would refer you to the brilliant pamphlet by Jeremy Gilbert and Mark Fisher, *Reclaim Modernity* (2014). In it Jem and Mark explain exactly why the market state triumphed over the bureaucratic state and what we need to put in place a democratic state. Because we were too statist – and too indifferent to personal choice and notions of freedom – because the state was too remote – we paved the way for the counter revolution. Because the answer isn't to dare more markets – but to dare more democracy.

Now I agree – let’s keep the baby – but not in cold water which, like the cold lumpy mash potato in a comprehensive school canteen, isn’t much fun. The state has to be transformed – warmed up, localised, humanised or it will remain unpopular. New Labour just grafted a bit of the market onto the Old Labour machine of the state. That was always going to fail. Of course, the current problems in the NHS are down to Tory austerity – but there is a fundamental problem of bureaucracies in the twenty-first century and they are struggling – it’s about more than money. So we are both for the state – it just looks like I put more accent on reform – is that right?

But the state is only one bit of the crisis of social democracy – which is occurring everywhere. There is not one single social democratic party in the world that is intellectually or organisationally on the front foot. The crises in Greece – PASOK may have been wiped out by the time people read this – Spain and closer to home in Scotland – tell us there is real trouble brewing. No party is reviving itself. Not one.

I go back to my original thesis – social democracy was a nineteenth-century construct that did some good in the twentieth century but is proving inadequate for the twenty-first century. That’s because the culture is now so different. Indra Adnan and I said it – we are living in New Times (Adnan and Lawson, 2014).

And we disagree Martin – I think it’s precisely the job of politicians to explain their morality – to say what a good life and a good society is. It’s then up to people to debate it and decide what they want. It is the lack of morality in Labour that’s the problem, when it has nothing structural to fall back on. In many ways, morality and power to convene are all Labour has. I am worried that you don’t think politicians should preach. You’re not alone – I hear this a lot. It means neo-liberalism wins – because it moralises all the time. All we are left with is managerialism and statist tendencies that leave people cold. One of the most influential books of my life is David Marquand’s *The Unprincipled Society* (1988) – which makes a simple but utterly essential point – without morality, there is no basis for political support. Especially when the working class is no longer a class of and for itself. Especially when the Soviet Union has gone and memories of the Second World War and the Depression before it.

And we disagree too on TVs. If your TV can never be big enough – you say ‘nice’ – they don’t sell us ‘nice’ they sell us a never ever ending stream of upgrades you must have – and if you must have them then inequality will follow – because not everyone can have them. They wouldn’t be worth buying if they could. Turbo-consumption is deigned to pull us apart. And whoops – like many social democrats you forgot to mention the implications for the planet, which always hits the poorest

first and hardest. And of course all must eat and have shelter and dignity – I just don't believe that's possible in a consumer society because that isn't what a consumer society is made to do.

I say all this knowing you are at the very best end of the social democratic spectrum – you're as good as it gets – but I fear it's not good enough, Martin. I fear the underlying economic, social and culture forces have shifted so far from 1945 and even 1997 that we need more than a robust defence of the state.

Martin, everything that once made us strong and brought capitalism to the table to compromise in the middle decades of the last century has gone. So what do we do now? I know that 'we make history but not in conditions of our choosing'. But we can still choose and we can still look to tap into new sources of energy and idealism. The future will be based on the culture and flat structures of Facebook and not the hierarchy of the factory.

To survive Labour has to break with austerity, not just be mildly better than the Tories. It must break with a singular and majoritarian politics and embrace PR and pluralism. It must totally link the politics of equality and environment, red and green. It is going to have to start to examine radical ideas like a basic income. Yes, much of that demands the state – I believe in the state – just not the Morrisonian model. If Keir Hardie was kicking around today he would not have built the Labour Party the way he did over a century ago. He would have built it around the culture and governance structures of the twenty-first century. Unless we renew Labour on that basis – it will die.

We need a social democracy fit for the twenty-first century. Do you feel the scale of the challenge and what the blooming hell are we going to do about it?

My best as ever,  
Neal

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**From:** Martin O'Neill

**To:** Neal Lawson

Dear Neal,

Many thanks for your characteristically generous and thoughtful response.

You probably think I'm going on too much about the place of the state, and I'm sure you're right, but do bear with me for a moment longer. I think you're right that there

are elements of the broader Labour movement – from both its Blairite and ‘Blue’ factions – that have fallen into a kind of excessive anti-statism. Some such views can only be seen as an over-reaction to the shortcomings of how New Labour made use of a state that could often seem remote or callous. I’m very glad to hear that you’re not making the same mistakes of over-reaction, and nobody could demur from your position of being constructively critical of the role of the state. So perhaps we disagree less than I sometimes think we do.

John Harris, with whom you say you agree on a lot, put it very nicely at the Compass ‘Change How?’ conference in 2013 that the project of the left has to be about capturing the state, because ‘you can’t redistribute income sitting in a tent outside St Paul’s’ (see <http://bit.ly/compasschangehow2013>). Quite so. I’m not sure how to square that with his more recent criticisms of Ed Miliband’s Labour Party for an approach that looks to create a more egalitarian economy and society by virtue of ‘lever pulling’ policies that rely on some allegedly antediluvian dream of ‘the capture of the centralised state’ (Harris, 2014). But obviously that’s a question for him rather than you. If there’s a real inconsistency there, as there would appear to be on first sight, I’ll assume that it’s at a point well after your agreement with him has run out.

Now, you say that no social democratic party is on the front foot anywhere, citing the fall of PASOK in Greece and the deep problems of the PSOE in Spain as evidence. I think that the same evidence points in a different direction. It’s not that PASOK and the PSOE show the intellectual or organisational exhaustion of social democracy – rather, it is that in undergoing a literally hopeless and completely unimaginative capitulation to an austere, neo-liberal agenda, those parties had ceased to be social democratic parties in anything but name. Their replacements, Syriza and Podemos, have become the embodiments of a genuine social democratic vision of how the state can transform society. For all their inaccurate portrayal in the British media as ‘far-left’ political formations, their platforms and proposals are in the historical mainstream of European social democratic politics. As Aditya Chakraborty rightly puts it: ‘much of Syriza’s platform is simply left-wing social democracy spoken as if the politicians believe in it, rather than as just another dead slogan to mouth’ (Chakraborty, 2015).

Here’s a nice example of what I have in mind. Listen to what Pablo Iglesias of Podemos had to say when addressing a recent rally of Syriza supporters in Athens:

Our aim today, unfortunately, is not the withering away of the state, or the disappearance of prisons, or that Earth become a paradise. But we do

aspire, as I said, to make it so that all children go to public schools clean and well-fed; that all the elderly receive a pension and be taken care of in the best hospitals; that any young person – independently of who their parents are – be able to go to college; that nobody have their heat turned off in the winter because they can't pay their bill; that no bank be allowed to leave a family in the street without alternative housing; that everyone be able to work in decent conditions without having to accept shameful wages; that the production of information in newspapers and on television not be a privilege of multi-millionaires; that a country not have to kneel down before foreign speculators. In one word: that a society be able to provide the basic material conditions that make dignity and happiness possible. These modest objectives that today seem so radical simply represent democracy. (Iglesias, 2014)

Those are not the demands of a post-statist political party or one that casts scorn on 'lever pulling' policies. These are the demands of a party that sees a fundamental role for the state in creating a fair and democratic society, in providing social benefits and public services, in realising a goal of fair equality of opportunity, in providing housing, schools and hospitals, in regulating the press in order to prevent unfair inequalities of political influence, and in taxing the wealthiest members of society. You say that social democracy 'did some good in the twentieth century but is proving inadequate for the twenty-first century' (Lawson, 2014). The supporters of Podemos would be likely to disagree with you; their disillusion is with supposedly social democratic *parties* that no longer have the courage of their convictions, not with the perennially important social democratic *objective* of using the power of the state to redistribute wealth, power and opportunity. Podemos and Syriza are imbued with a spirit that fits precisely with Leszek Kołakowski's characterisation of social democracy – 'an obstinate will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering' (Kołakowski, 1982; see also Jackson, 2013). Syriza's platform, with its aid for the poor, commitment to create new jobs and egalitarian reform of the tax system, share the same kind of radical yet practical social democratic vision that infuses Iglesias's speech (which was, after all, a speech to a Syriza audience).

You say that 'the future will be based on the culture and flat structures of Facebook'. My worry is that you confuse form and content, or have become so preoccupied with the medium that you're in danger of downplaying the real message. Let me explain what I mean. In some recent Compass publications, some

of which you mention above, there is a great deal of discussion of the social changes that have accompanied class dealignment, the changing structure of the economy, and the rise of social media. You and your co-authors say many interesting things about these developments. But I worry that you draw the wrong conclusions from them. In *New Times: How a Politics of Networks and Relationship can Deliver a Good Society* (Adnan and Lawson, 2014), co-authored with Indra Adnan, you say that we should adjust ourselves to a future where we align ourselves with collaboration over competition, networks over markets, and the feminine over the macho (p. 11); we are told how we can be ‘more fully human in a networked world’ (pp. 13-14); our political future is, we’re told, to be one of ‘horizontal connectivity’, where the remaking of our social world in the image of Facebook seems to be held up not merely as an inevitability but as a welcome goal. Elsewhere, you argue in favour of an end to traditional models of public services, and their replacement by forms of co-production where services are ‘modernised and reformed every day through the interaction of staff and users’ whereby we ‘refashion every aspect of a service collectively’ on the model of this kind of horizontalist, collaborative, decentralised model of interaction (see the summary of Gannon and Lawson (2008) in Fisher and Gilbert, 2014). I’m not a Luddite; to the contrary, I think that the horizontal structures of social media are a brilliant way of arguing together about politics and spreading ideas. But that doesn’t mean that those arguments and ideas should be about themselves or their own sociology; the political power of social media is that it gives us new ways of thinking together about the things that really matter, not that it has to create a dominant mode of interaction which should seep into every corner of our lives. Form does not have to collapse into content; the medium need not be message.

A vision of public services that have been fully imbued with the culture and flat structures of Facebook may have an initial appeal, but that attraction collapses under scrutiny. When I think about my children’s school, I have absolutely zero interest in it being run as a never-ending horizontal conversation between parents, children and teachers. I don’t want it ‘modernised and reformed every day’. I want it to be well-funded, held to high national standards, and for its day-to-day running to be in the hands of teachers who are treated with respect as professionals and who are, by and large, allowed to get on with the important job for which they have trained and in which they are the experts. Communication between schools and families is important, of course, but not in a way that is fundamentally different to how it was important twenty or thirty years ago, long before Facebook or Twitter. I like Facebook, and see its virtues (as well as its problems), including its virtues as a tool

of political communication. But I don't want my local council, hospital or school to be remodelled in its image.

This brings me to a deeper disagreement. You get it right when you say that I don't think that politicians should preach. I also wish that Compass would preach less. You think that politicians should be telling us what they think a good life would be like, just as you and your co-authors tell us your view of the good life in the publications mentioned above. But I think we need to distinguish between two ways of appealing to moral values. One set of moral values are distinctively political – ideas of social justice, liberty, equality and solidarity. These are the lifeblood of politics, and I wish we heard more of them. Moreover, it is great credit to Ed Miliband's underappreciated transformation of the Labour Party that we at least hear far more frequent direct appeals to the values of justice and equality than we ever did during New Labour.

In distinction to these political values, another set of moral values are those to which we appeal when we think about how to live our lives as individual agents. For many, their personal ethical outlook will be informed by religious faith, while many others will shape their ethical viewpoint through synthesising a variety of other sources, whether those consist of art, novels, family, community or even works of philosophy. For everyone, this is a deeply personal matter. I think that there's a danger of a kind of folly of presumption in thinking that politicians, or political pressure groups, should be telling people how to lead their lives, or what to value. We all have our own lives to lead, and respecting people's freedom to live their life in accord with their values means being cautious and circumspect in dragging those questions into the political domain. A just society has room for the misanthrope who'd rather just pass on the offer of a festival of networked relationships. To take a different case, one can reasonably demand of some macho, competitive capitalist that he or she treats people fairly, sticks to the rules, and pays his or her taxes. In making those demands, one should certainly make use of the moral-political values of social justice and equality. But if my relationship to our imagined capitalist buccaneer is simply the relation of one citizen to another, then it is disrespectful and presumptuous, not to mention counter-productive, to tell him or her that s/he should abandon competition for cooperation, or behave in a way that's more 'feminine' instead of 'macho'. If I tell him or her that this is what 'New Times' demands, then I'm in danger of seeming more like someone promoting a airport bookshop self-help book, or perhaps a New Age therapy centre, rather than making a plausible political demand. This also means that it

should be no part of embracing a more egalitarian form of politics to condemn the material aspirations of people who might enjoy new clothes, big television sets or whatever else it is that contributes to their pursuit of the good life as they see it. There's enough competitive moralism in our culture already; there's no need to add to it.

Kořakowski was aware that the anti-utopianism of social democracy can make it seem drab or unexciting compared to projects that seek comprehensively to remake how we live and interact. As he put it, social democracy 'has invented no miraculous devices to bring about the perfect unity of men or universal brotherhood' (1982) (I hope we can forgive him the generational lapse of gendered language). But that lack of 'miraculous devices' isn't a real failing. Instead, it's just the very same, very practical acknowledgement of the circumstances and limits of politics that we saw above in Pablo Iglesias's speech in Athens. One of the great advantages of the social democratic vision is that it isn't a totalising one; rather, it leaves room for people, in all their diversity, to live their lives.

One of the besetting vices of political argument is the narcissism of minor differences, so I'm going to refuse to end my letter on a note of disagreement. We both know who the political enemy are, and it's the people who want another five years of this dispiriting, hopeless Coalition government. We agree, and they do not, that environmental sustainability is inextricably bound up with justice, that the political economy of this country needs to be transformed in a more egalitarian direction, and that one of the most important transfers that a state can undertake is the redistribution (and predistribution) of political and economic power to locations closer to people's daily lives. We agree that a vibrant twenty-first century version of social democracy is going to have to think with real imagination about new forms of taxation and redistribution, to think more radically about monetary policy, and to explore ways of overturning structural inequalities of wealth, opportunity and power (for some recent suggestions on how to achieve this, see Guinan, 2012; O'Neill & Williamson, 2012b; O'Neill, 2014; Atkinson, 2015).

You're a dynamo of radical energy, Neal, and we agree on more than nine tenths of what matters. More power to you for the work ahead.

Warmest regards,  
Martin

**From:** Neal Lawson

**To:** Martin O'Neill

Dear Martin,

Thanks for your thoughtful and extended response – which made me think and will help rebalance my opinions and thoughts. I've a tendency to see and hear what reinforces my world view (don't we all?) – that's why I like debate – so I can readjust and rebalance.

And the notion of balance is probably my main gentle retort. The issue is not either/or. The most important word in our political lexicon is AND. You defend the state for reasons I fully understand and have so much sympathy for. I'm not advocating the end of the role of the central state – what I am suggesting is that the predominant form of 'social democracy' in the future, if it is to have a future, cannot be dominated by its twentieth century form. It will require more networks of us and less of the central state.

Let me put it as clearly as I can – the Soviet Union is dead. Its Fabian/Morrisonian younger cousin is dying with it. They share the same technocratic and paternalistic DNA. A politics that is done to people. We will still need a bit of this – particularly when it comes to big beasts like the bond market and how to redistribute hard cash – but we should be looking to other forms of governance – other ways of doing stuff. And we do so at a unique moment because the bureaucratic state – which I feel you cleave to – and its successor the free market model are both in crisis. 1989 and the fall of the Wall, the crash of 2008, and the increasing cultural dominance of the internet and social media provide the back drop for fresh thinking – new ways of egalitarian and democratic possibilities becoming reality. Flatness not hierarchy is potentially good for the left. Yes, they will be contested and yes, it will need the state to underpin the rules – but the predominant form of 'social democracy' must become more networked, more peer to peer and bottom up – and much less top down. People will have nothing less.

You see, Martin, the levers of the state you grip are a metaphor for a cultural moment that is fast fading in the rear view mirror – the levers of an industrial and mechanical age in which the centre could rule supreme. The levers that a mighty, muscular and male working class once pulled. The levers that the civil servants pulled at the behest of their Labour Party masters. But that world no longer works – or rather not enough of it does. In their absence we are left with your call for social

democrats to have the ‘courage of their convictions’, which I welcome but convictions aren’t enough – we need a social and economic movement for change – one rooted in the real struggles of today and based on the culture of organising today – not of a hundred years ago.

You question my strong interest in a world driven by the flattening structures of the internet – in which connections and voice are being rapidly accelerated. You say: ‘when I think about my children’s school, I have absolutely zero interest in it being run as a never-ending horizontal conversation between parents, children and teacher’. You exaggerate my point to make yours – no one is talking about never-ending conversations. What I am saying is that if you think you can outsource the socialisation of your child to a stranger – with little or no input from you – then it will go wrong. The best schools will need the active involvement of you, your child and the community in the process of learning. Yes, great professionals too – but that isn’t enough. We are going to have to get involved – and that can be fun and creative. And it’s going to need time and we are going to have to be resourced to be active citizens with some sense of control over our lives and the institutions that matter to us. Presumably you don’t have a thing against workplace democracy? So why not schools or hospitals? It’s the same democratic principle.

In the absence of this democratic culture, in the absence of conviction or class, social democrats have fallen back on control and an even stronger reliance on the centre. No one else can be trusted. There must be only Labour’s hand on the levers. In a world becoming ever more complex and plural – social democrats are becoming more singular. Take a few examples; instead of community renewable energy schemes that grow us as citizens while saving us money and the planet – we get a top down price cap. Instead of resourcing local campaigns for a living wage, we get another back end deal with companies to pay them to pay the living wage. We might have both top down and bottom up, but with social democrats it is predominantly top down – all about them and their role. The culture of the times suggests something else – a culture which allows us to encourage the growth of citizens who become the agents of a new social democracy.

Martin, you claim Syriza and Podemos as part of the social democratic family. Well, maybe. But the point is that they are new and arose out of real movements – Podemos in particular came from the Indignados – they were the forerunners of Occupy. They were the activists who physically stopped home repossessions – and campaigned actively against privatisation. They built their party on a system of circles – local grass roots groups and direct democracy. They crowd-sourced their

policy programme. They still have no membership system to speak of. They are committed above all to a programme of radical and deep democratisation of Spain. This may be modern social democracy, but exactly how far from Labour and the other social democratic parties does this feel? The gap is simply yawning. And more than anything it's a cultural gap – between those that think change is about central lever pulling as the predominant form of making things happen and those that think we are entering a new way of making things happen in a networked society.

In a sense, I don't care whether it's PASOK or Syriza in Greece or PSOE or Podemos in Spain – or whoever claims to be more social democratic – the point is that change comes from movements and the emergence of new and relevant forms of common collective endeavour. Social democratic parties of old – all of them – are proving that they cannot yet adapt to these new times. They are sticking like glue to the past. They can get back into government if the electoral maths make it possible – but with insufficient life, energy or purpose to challenge the new elites or stop climate change. They are too wedded to neo-liberalism to make the necessary links with the precariat. They are too wedded to growth at any cost to be green. And Martin you never said how big your TV was and how big you want it to be compared to others and what does that mean for the environment or an individualistic and competitive society? It's other things we need to grow – time, love, compassion, voice and participation. Yes, enough for all to live decently, but not a never-ending conveyor belt of stuff we didn't know we needed, bought with money we don't have, to impress people we don't know. Have that as a bit of morality.

This is not preaching – as you accuse me – I'm just saying this is what I believe in – with a passion – yes, with conviction. I'm not saying you should agree. I am saying that creating the space to discuss and debate our values and our vision, negotiating the future between us, and having democratic ways of deciding the big things as well as the small is the most important thing social democrats can do. This is what Podemos seems to be doing. The journey is everything – means and ends conflated into how we behave with each other now. I love the fact that you see so much that is good in new ventures like Podemos – that kind of party is where our future lies. Can Labour become something like that?

Look at Labour in 2015 in a world in which we all have a voice and say – it doesn't even trust its members, let alone the rest of the country. Its internal democracy is totally hollowed out. It won't go near the very basics of a new economy – like a

Financial Transaction Tax – for fear of upsetting the City. It runs a mile from any talk of proportional representation – the very basic building blocks of a democracy that can help us tame capitalism. When hope, in the form of community organising through Arnie Graf, crops up – the plug is savagely pulled. That’s because his approach challenges the essence of social democracy and shifts power away from the centre. Labour kept a millions miles away from Occupy, the student protests, recent housing struggles, or initiatives like Transition Towns. Its relationship to the unions – and the unions to it – is largely instrumental not intrinsic. It has no roots and so it slowly dries up.

You say of PASOK and the PSOE that ‘it is that in undergoing a literally hopeless and completely unimaginative capitulation to an austere, neo-liberal agenda, those parties had ceased to be social democratic parties in anything but name’. But that sounds like every social democratic party. Face up to the systemic crisis, Martin, so we can find a way beyond it.

The upshot of refusing to do so is Labour in Scotland – a slow separation of head and body that suddenly falls off a cliff as soon as a viable alternative appears. This is just a close quarters warning of what will happen in England and Wales. It has happened in Greece and Spain as we know – France is most likely next.

So to end on the reality of politics in Britain. We hope against hope that Labour can win to stop the Tories. But even if that’s what happens – then what? Can you pull levers to stop the poor getting poorer or the planet burning? Will levers restore our belief in democracy? Can a few clever and well-meaning people rebuild a project for a good society? Yes – a bit – but increasingly not. The world is changing so fast and we must be brave enough to change with it – not our values, but the way we put them into practice. We can bend the world to us if we let go of the past. Others will take our place if we don’t – and they may not be the seekers of social justice that we are.

Hold on tight to your levers Martin – it’s going to be a bumpy ride.

My best always,

Neal

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