

# Features

## Rediscovering Labour's soul

### *A politics of good work*

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#### **Introduction**

In 2007, just before Gordon Brown took charge of the New Labour project, Eric Shaw asked whether Labour had lost its soul (Shaw, 2007). His answer was a qualified 'yes'. Although New Labour had made substantial progress when it came to the redistribution of wealth and equality of opportunity, it had gradually detached itself from the ethos of fellowship and co-operation that thinkers associated with the party in the early twentieth century considered central to the Labour project. Tony Blair may have talked the language of 'community' and 'solidarity', but New Labour policies steadily corroded co-operative life as they extended the acid individualism of Tawney's 'acquisitive society'.

So far Labour has struggled to articulate an alternative to David Cameron's plans for a 'Big Society'. In principle it seems right that the state should hand more power over to the people. How can you argue with deeper democracy? But something feels wrong. Is civil society up to the job of stepping into the breach where the state steps out? Can we really rely on markets that are only just beginning to recover from their dramatic collapse to fill the hole left by the public sector? Since the state is guarantor of a decent life for the least advantaged, this is a high-risk strategy that could have traumatic unintended consequences.

But defending the state without recognising the need for alternative long-term solutions to the provision of social goods seems short-sighted. Inefficiency, unaffordability and inertia have begun to characterise public services. Increasingly, bureaucracy is stifling small businesses and alienating individuals from their government. In the public mind, Labour is fundamentally associated with the state. But the state has become part of the problem.

Ed Miliband's 'new generation' recognises that Labour needs to rediscover its soul, but there is a lack of clarity about *how* both state and market can be transformed and how this will present an alternative to the Big Society. Labour can certainly learn from the political success of grassroots organisations such as London Citizens, drawing on the party's long tradition of emphasis on 'the essential role of organisation' as well as 'on relationship, on place and the everyday' (Baskerville and Stears, 2010, 69). But there are other traditions on the left that emerge from a considered critique of the Coalition's Big Idea – traditions

that, once recovered, could help return Miliband's party to the core of the Labour movement.

### **The critique of the Big Society: a summary**

The critique of the Big Society begins by observing that handing responsibility over to communities in their existing form would be an undemocratic form of empowerment – and less effective for it. Inequalities systematically produced and reinforced by the market will prevent many from participating in the Big Society, resulting in collaborations that – although based on goodwill – are both deeply unrepresentative of the people they are supposed to benefit and leave a large pool of resources untapped. As Ed Turner recently pointed out, the notion that simply empowering communities in their current configuration must be progress is not restricted to the right; New Labour's 'new localism' also gave disproportionate voice to those with more 'time, resources and confidence to turn up and speak at a public meeting' (Turner, 2010, 59). But the scale of the Coalition's cuts places even more at stake than New Labour's new localism, risking a situation where the design and implementation of services will lack any significant input from the people most likely to depend on them. The result? Inadequate services governed by an impoverished politics which – even with the best will in the world – fails to understand or address the challenges that matter to the people who face them.

Ensuring that the provision of social goods is governed democratically is not easy. The democratic governance of state-run public services requires the government to pump substantial resources into both insulating these services from the market and maintaining representative political channels. These measures are aimed at levelling out a political playing field that would otherwise be churned and furrowed by inequalities arising from people's interaction with the market. But as non-state alternatives to public service provision become more viable, parties will have to shift their focus – an inclusive, collaborative politics must be developed around these new models of service provision. But it is not at all clear that the Big Society, with its powerlessness in the face of market inequalities, provides this inclusive vision.

### **The recommendation: a summary**

Reformers promoting a good society rather than an impoverished 'big' society need to place concern for democracy at the heart of their efforts, and to recognise the centrality of the marketplace in any configuration of society. They should try to stimulate a grassroots politics of 'social learning': a collaborative process tasked with discovering and building up people's capacities to reconfigure the way they work. The aim of this politics should be to improve 'bad' work – work that leaves little room for co-operation and social contribution – into 'good' work – work that actively promotes these things.

This approach would give the Labour Party a chance to return to the optimistic conception of human potential at the heart of progressive socialism. This strand of socialist thought prioritises a co-operative politics of social learning, viewing this 'deep' form of democracy as both a means towards a good society and an end in itself. By reinstating democracy to the core of British socialism, Labour's answer to the Big Society could mark

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the return to a new programmatic politics of the left – one that wraps a manifesto for both changing a malfunctioning state and reforming an iniquitous market around an optimistic conception of human potential.

Political parties straddle the divide between civil society and the state, so party activists are uniquely positioned to promote this agenda. As Stella Creasy has noted, huge resources of time and energy are used up by grassroots Labour members in the organisation of and attendance at meetings (Creasy, 2010). Activists could redirect some of this energy towards building co-operative links between people across markets, civil society and the public sector, paying particular attention to those who would ordinarily lack the resources for such co-operation. Crucially, this project should recognise the potential for better work to facilitate social learning and an inclusive politics. Only a political party, and Labour in particular, can foster an inclusive politics of social learning.

**The Big Society's deficiencies**

In October, meetings due to be held across the country to discuss steps towards David Cameron's 'Big Society' had to be cancelled in the face of anger over the Coalition's cuts (Brindle, 2010). The Big Society Network, an organisation that has stressed its independence from government, had intended to hold a series of events at which those active in civil society could come together to discuss how to achieve the Network's aim of creating 'the U.K.'s biggest mutual' (1). The mission statement is nothing if not ambitious. Unsurprisingly, the Network's town hall tour was met from the outset by questions about how an aim this ambitious could be fulfilled in a climate of such brutal fiscal austerity.

Third sector organisations may be prepared to do good work for comparatively little financial gain, but the message was clear: without adequate support from the state, good works are going to be much harder. Lower public spending will make it much more difficult for anyone participating in civil society to maintain their activity. Many third sector organisations are reliant on public sector contracts. If the public sector has less money, the third sector will take a powerful hit. In London alone 400 charities are set to lose their funding, according to Unite (Plummer, 2010). Where individual jobs and livelihoods are in jeopardy, it isn't surprising that third sector employees are not champing at the bit to widen their sphere of co-operation.

The individuals, voluntary organisations and socially responsible businesses that are supposed to form the backbone of the Conservatives' Big Society require substantial resources to do their good works: time, money, energy, motivation, expertise and infrastructure. Market failure means that, one way or another, these resources are in short supply for those who want to do good works.

This observation exposes the fundamental weakness of the Coalition's approach to the Big Society, and its essential conservatism. Our capacity to co-operate for the greater good is intimately connected to the way the market operates – but calls for a Big Society to take over from the state lack a realistic assessment of this connection. Volunteers are only able to commit their time to building a better society if their activities are supported by paid work, and this paid work may well be under threat from the Coalition's austerity politics. Add to this the probable extra strain of augmented social and health problems

(depression, stress, drug abuse, anti-social behaviour, frayed relationships at work and at home) due to redundancies, pay cuts and efficiency savings throughout the economy, and you have a third sector with dramatically fewer resources to carry out its good works than it had before. Mirroring the market's malaise, the relationships within civil society will become strained, the wellsprings of co-operation will start to dry up and the production of social goods will grind to a slower pace.

But this emaciated third sector will not only be worse equipped to do its job; it will also be considerably less inclusive and less representative of the broader society it seeks to serve. Those most likely to stop volunteering in a badly-performing economy are disproportionately those from poorer, lower-skilled backgrounds with fewer independent means of support. This would only strengthen the existing white, middle-aged and middle-class character of the voluntary sector (Coote, 2010, 17).

Even if the Big Society Network succeeded in forming a mutual that seemed like it was Britain – the Network's original aim – it wouldn't really be Britain at all. It would be a sample of Britain that looked uncannily like a conservative heartland. A dedicated network of third sector participants, yes. But not in any way representative of Britain.

### **The Big Society's prerequisites**

In many ways, the Big Society is a move in the right direction. British politics now seems to have reached a consensus that a shift in power from state to society must occur. Public sector institutions now appear too inefficient, ineffective, and unrepresentative to deal with many contemporary challenges. It is also undoubtedly true that co-operation to provide social goods without the aid of expensive resources has become much easier and more prevalent. Market forms are starting to shift from a logic of pure capitalism to a logic of partnership thanks to the possibility of creating goods with only a minimal intervention of capital (Bauwens, 2007). 'Wikinomics' and the age of mass collaboration seem to put social productivity within everyone's reach (Tapscott and Williams, 2006). Society may not need the state as much as it once did – it really is better-equipped to help itself.

But just because non-state co-operation has become easier, this doesn't mean it is in a position to replace state-based solutions. Many jobs still severely restrict our ability to become contributors, neither incorporating socially good work into our job descriptions nor providing us with sufficient resources to do socially good work in our own time. This is particularly true for those in the least desirable jobs: those who are paid the lowest incomes, subjected to the most pressure, and given little autonomy in their work. Stuart Weir has given us some idea of this problem's extent, citing the Citizen Audit's finding that those with the lowest household income, manual workers, and those with fewest years in education are more likely to be politically inactive. Worse, this uneven participation self-perpetuates as organisational links multiply amongst 'the well-educated and well-heeled' and further exclude those with the least resources (Weir, 2008).

So it seems that the people most likely to depend on the services that the Big Society is supposed to provide may also be those least likely to have the opportunity to take part in their design and implementation. It is difficult to see how non-state solutions that lack the input of service users could possibly avoid paternalism and insensitivity to the needs of

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those they seek to serve. It is also difficult to see how they could operate sustainably without the expertise of these service users – expertise that represents a significant potential contribution to collaboratively-run non-state services.

Society's capacity to take over the 'good works' of the state with any success is inextricably linked to the market's capacity to provide 'good work'. Without good work – work that leaves space for co-operation and social contribution – society's strength is depleted. The essential conservatism of 'Big Society' rhetoric stems from its willingness to talk about social reform without talking about radical market reform – to treat the promotion of 'good works' and 'good work' as discrete challenges. As the New Economics Foundation points out, though the Coalition recognises the problem of uneven participation, its plans for a 'Community First Fund' to stimulate good works in poor areas fail to address the systemic causes of exclusion (Coote, 2010, 22). By taking this unrealistic, unsustainable approach we could easily end up with society-based services that do worse than their state-based counterparts.

**Co-operative socialism – the original Big Society?**

The failure of conservative politics to recognise how our experience of work shapes our capacity to co-operate for the social good was one of the driving forces behind progressive politics at the end of the nineteenth century. For liberal thinkers such as T. H. Green, the opportunity for individuals to develop in the context of co-operation was the key to human flourishing. Without co-operation, 'the possibilities of [people's] nature could not be realised' (Simhony, 2005, 129).

Those involved in the Fellowship of the New Life – a 'pioneering British socialist organisation' of the 1880s and 1890s – shared this insight, emphasising that work frequently prevented people from leading lives characterised by co-operation (Manton, 2003, 1). Work too often shaped people's very character in an individualist mould through a 'narrowing of life'. This not only made for individuals who lacked the freedom to realise their potential; it also made for individuals who lacked the inclination to do so, and who failed to recognise that they *could* do so.

But this critique of work need not be allied to any strong moral claim about the way we should live, the people we should be, or the actions we should take as individuals; it does not have to be underpinned by an 'ethical' socialism (Manton, 2003). The critique is based on two observations about how we live that remain accurate today: first, that the way our work is organised can create conditions that prevent us from co-operating as we might; and second, that this lack of co-operation obstructs certain possibilities for us as individuals. It doesn't clearly tell us what our potential is as human beings or what the 'good life' or 'good society' would look like. It doesn't tell us *how much* co-operation is a good thing, or how radically our economy should be transformed.

Although its members have since been typecast as 'ethical' socialists, the Fellowship was 'plainly and diametrically opposed' to principles that would separate the ethical from the political, or utopian thinking from hard-headed realism (Manton, 2003, 284). They began their project by co-operating amongst themselves to explore the possibilities that emerged through collaboration, not by trying to reform the market so that it matched up to an ideal of the good life (Manton, 2003, 296-301).

Such a cautious socialism forbids separating the task of theorising about what should be done from the task of implementing reforms. Even the smallest step towards more co-operative work must go hand in hand with a process of collective reassessment and decision-making. Because non-cooperative work may prevent people from recognising the possibilities open to them – and from learning what a ‘good’ life could entail – economic reform must be accompanied by a co-operative politics in which people collectively learn about their own potential. Unlike the Hobhousian ethical socialism espoused by Jon Cruddas and Jonathan Rutherford, politics is *not* ‘rightfully subordinate to ethics’ – rather politics and ethics are two sides of the same coin (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2010, 16).

### Co-operative socialism corrupted

Still, promoting a more co-operative society depended on a political party that would in practice change the way that work shaped people’s lives. Those who founded the Labour Party – including the Fabian Society that emerged from the Fellowship of the New Life in 1884 – might ideally have wanted co-operation to infuse all economic activity. But where there was little hope of employers agreeing to create ‘good’ work to enable this, a more incremental strategy had to be employed.

Amongst the tools that allowed social democratic parties to achieve their goals was the mid-twentieth century welfare state. Though the impetus for establishing a more benevolent state was arguably a desire to rid society of Beveridge’s five giants, major strands of socialism saw the welfare state as an instrument for enabling a more politically inclusive, co-operative society – not as an end in itself. Thinkers such as G. D. H. Cole could never see a machine so detached from the control of the people it was supposed to benefit as the end goal of socialism. The point of the welfare state, for many social democrats, was to reshape the market, empowering workers politically by reducing their need to accept ‘bad’ work out of desperation. Better work would give the previously disenfranchised majority the resources to participate in a co-operative politics. A more equal distribution of political power was only possible with a more equal distribution of economic power. The welfare state was a good thing insofar as this was achieved.

Today we may struggle to see the welfare state as an instrument whose primary role is to bring about a more inclusive, more co-operative society by helping to reconfigure market relationships. Understanding the welfare state in this way is difficult partly because the social democratic politics that underpins it has lost sight of its co-operative socialist heritage and embraced a top-down approach that works with an essentially conservative conception of the individual as a passive recipient of social goods, rather than as a potential collaborator whose aspirations will develop in the context of co-operation.

This centralist tendency, evident in the Labour Party from Webbian Fabianism all the way through to New Labour, does not necessarily stem from an initial rejection of co-operation as a socialist ideal. The trouble is that by subordinating the messy business of grassroots politics to ‘enlightened’ but detached policy-making, you lose one of the only opportunities that many people have to engage in a process infused with an ethos of co-operation. And with it you lose the process of personal development and discovery that co-operative socialism believes is only possible through collaboration. Instead of devel-

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oping new ambitions as they revise their assessment of what they have the potential to do, individuals' aspirations will stagnate. However knowledgeable policy-makers are, and however competently they develop policies that will 'deliver', their politics will inevitably end up reflecting the undisturbed conservatism of the electorate. Instead of devolving responsibility for service provision from state to society wherever this becomes possible, social democratic politics will remain content with the status quo: provider serving user, state caring for its dependants.

By abandoning grassroots politics, progressive parties will be unable to tap into a huge source of potential that would accelerate the move towards a more co-operative society. The loss of momentum that results could cripple the electoral viability of social democratic parties. This may be precisely the cause of New Labour's recent collapse.

Had it developed policies around the long-term aim of making society more co-operative and more inclusive, New Labour might have helped knit together a strong support base to carry it through to further success. Instead, it adopted a dual approach, retaining the basic principles of social democracy yet adapting to what seemed like the increasingly individualistic aspirations of the electorate. By shuffling its policies around to produce a compromise 'Third Way' politics, a programme for bringing society together was abandoned and, perhaps unsurprisingly, Labour's potential support base drifted apart. In order to foster a co-operative society, New Labour would have had to prioritise the cultivation of an independent grassroots politics. It would have had to enable a 'politics of social learning' – a process that gives individuals the opportunity to move beyond conservative assumptions about their aspirations by engaging in co-operation with others – rather than relying on a system of policy-making based on focus group responses and poll data. You cannot cultivate a truly solidaristic, co-operative society that 'pulls together' unless you first actively construct the space that allows people to see how this could be possible.

**Today's politics**

Understanding New Labour's neglect of grassroots politics and its implications could be the key to understanding the state that British politics is in today. The wide appeal of the Coalition's narrow 'politics of fairness' seems symptomatic of exactly the kind of conservatism that remains entrenched in the absence of an inclusive politics of social learning.

As Will Davies points out, promoting fairness above all other values can come very close to endorsing the status quo (Davies, 2010). The morality of fairness as interpreted by the Coalition seems to be governed by an individualistic and backwards-looking notion of desert. To take a fair decision, you examine each individual's contribution, assess how much of this is due to good luck and bad luck (and so on), and reward them proportionately. The trouble is that policy based primarily on this narrow interpretation of fairness precludes a very different form of politics that may emerge once people recognise each other as individuals whose motivations, propensities and prejudices are complex and malleable.

It precludes, for instance, the politics underpinning universalistic welfare states that build the kind of solidarity capable of supporting a co-operative society. It may be better

for everyone if those who have done (or suffered) nothing to 'deserve' subsidised childcare or education are given it nonetheless. In the long run this could help construct a consensus around a more inclusive social democratic politics, giving affluent parents an interest in sustaining more equitable services. A morality based solely on fairness narrowly understood wouldn't tell you this. But such a morality may well be accepted by the electorate as a sufficient basis for the Coalition's economic policy. The question that co-operative socialism pushes us to ask is this: if we were given the opportunity to discuss, argue, empathise with and persuade each other – if we were able to participate in a co-operative 'politics of social learning' instead of simply being *consulted* by pollsters and focus group facilitators – would we retain this conservative preference for a narrow, piecemeal notion of 'fairness'?

### Progressivism not conservatism

Cameron apparently acknowledges the flaws of statism and the importance of grass-roots activism. So if a politics of social learning is going to generate a better alternative to the 'fairness' agenda, shouldn't we expect this alternative to emerge from the Coalition's current strategy? Almost certainly not. Although Cameron's government sees potential for us all to become social contributors, it has not yet absorbed the point that makes socialism progressive rather than conservative: that social structures largely determined by market forces frequently prevent us from realising or even recognising this potential ourselves, creating a gap between the people we are and the people we could be. This is a gap that can only be closed by transforming the market to make room for a politics of social learning. Just as our work may prevent us from making the substantial social contributions that would underpin the Big Society, it can prevent us from participating in the process of social learning that might enable us even to discover our own potential to contribute.

Knowing what we are capable of ourselves often requires us to know what others are capable of. If we remain unaware of the leverage that local politicians have over policy, how can we know how much and what kind of influence we can exercise through our relationship with a local council or party activist? (2) And if we are not aware how willing affluent residents are to give something back to their community, how can we know that our skills and experience could help these residents direct their resources to where they are needed most? Unless our policy-making procedures are accompanied by an inclusive politics of social learning, many people's potential to contribute to society will remain untapped and non-state public services will be regressively undemocratic and exclusive. The trouble is that our working patterns, our housing arrangements and our educational segregation can all block opportunities to learn about other people's capabilities, fears and aspirations. Something as simple as a systemic unfamiliarity between rich and poor, skilled and unskilled, northern and southern, private-schooled and state-schooled can make a significant difference to the way we understand ourselves and others.

This is why an inclusive politics of social learning cannot be detached from efforts to improve *work*. Both are crucial to achieving the society-based democratic politics that must accompany any transfer of power away from the state. The process of turning 'bad' work into 'good' must structure our grass-roots politics. This should be built around collab-

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orations between political activists and employees dedicated to providing work that enables co-operation and social contribution. 'Good work' should provide opportunities for 'good works'.

Labour activists could be encouraged to build inclusive social networks around the task of improving work. These networks would join employees, managers, charity workers, social enterprises, politicians and students in projects that will try to re-imagine work, uncovering people's own latent capacity to change their own and others' lives in the process.

To rebuild its support base, Labour must rediscover its soul. It must prioritise a 'deep' form of social democracy that involves social learning, recognising that the principal obstacle to achieving deep democracy is bad work, and acknowledging that an inclusive grass-roots politics may be the only route to sustainable success for a social democratic party. This is where a new generation of Labour politicians and activists can make a real difference. They could be the ones to open up the possibility of a *good* society far more radical than the Conservatives' exclusive and undemocratic vision.

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## Notes

1. See <http://thebigsociety.co.uk/what-is-big-society/what-is-the-network/>.
2. Ed Turner provides an instructive example illustrating why this awareness is so important. Turner notes that new governance arrangements at the local level over the past decade fostered misconceptions about councils' power to deal with certain problems. Frustration and disappointment resulted after residents misdirected their attention towards councils to no avail (Turner, 2010, 59).