

Less talk, more action

Deborah Littman

Judging from the anguished outpourings of our columnists and bloggers, many on the Labour left have conflicted feelings about the government's plunge in the polls. On the one hand, it is hard not to feel that Labour deserves a kicking for abandoning the basic principles they were elected to promote. On the other, the spectre of another decade or two of Tory rule seems a hard price for us all to pay for the pleasure of giving Labour its comeuppance.

For decades those on the left (both in and out of the Party) have fought to get Labour into office, to keep them there and to defend them from their detractors. But after years of watching the government enact policies that exacerbate economic inequality and choose market domination over the common good, we are struggling to find a reason to keep supporting them, beyond the feeble fear that the Tories will be worse. Gerry Hassan sums up the total sense of disillusion in his recent Compass think piece, when he asks: 'What does Labour now stand for when "economic growth and social justice" has become so hollow, and "for the many, not the few" sounds meaningless? Who does Labour give voice to and who does it claim to represent?' (Hassan, 2008).

So what is the answer? And what do we do to rescue ourselves from the abyss we seem to be sleepwalking into? The remedy proposed by Hassan, and many others, is debate.

Labour desperately needs to change how it thinks of the world, and see the reality of the world as it is outside of the Westminster village ... The new terrain it needs to explore is not the Blairite time warp shaped by the battles of the 1980s, or the Brownite world of fear and caution, but can be found in the discussions within Compass, and within the politics of the new devolved bodies in Scotland and Wales, about what being progressive really means.

I have nothing against debate. It would be naïve to think that we could find effective engines of social change without a solid analysis of underlying problems. But if debate is *all* we do, we will end up quibbling and arguing, hair-splitting and point-scoring while the gains of a progressive agenda slip further and further away.

What we need is action, thoughtful, well considered action, but action nonetheless. Here's why.

Building a movement – the real meaning behind ‘the many and not the few’

One of the most dispiriting aspects of party politics is the extent to which real, grass-roots activism has dwindled. The Labour Party has less than 200,000 members now, compared to over 400,000 in 1997. Compass debates are happening on even a smaller scale, amongst about two to three thousand members.

Even if we were to miraculously convince Labour politicians to ‘see the light’ and adopt a truly progressive agenda, and even if the popularity of that manifesto got them elected for another term, where would we find the broad social movements capable of holding government to that path? How would we ensure that once elected, Labour didn’t once again throw in their lot with the business elite? Ralph Miliband once wrote:

Given the degree of economic power that rests in the ‘business community’ and the decisive importance of its actions (or its non actions) for major aspects of economic policy, any government with any pretensions to radical reform must either seek to appropriate that power or find its room for radical action rigidly circumscribed by the requirements of business ‘confidence’. So far no government in any Western-type political system, whatever its rhetoric before assuming office, has taken up the first of these options. Instead, reform-minded governments have, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes not, curbed their propensities (though never enough for the men they sought to appease) or adapted their reforms to the purposes of business ... and turned themselves into the allies of the very forces they had promised, while in opposition, to counter and subdue. Politics, in this context, is indeed the art of the possible. But what is possible is above all determined by what the ‘business community’ finds acceptable. (Miliband, 1969, 137)

Politics isn’t just about ideas, it’s about power, and debates do not build power, organising does.

The vast majority of people are not politically active, not because they aren’t interested in the political process, but because they have no sense of being able to affect it. A low-paid migrant worker, struggling with punitive immigration laws and inadequate housing, is not going to see much point in debating the contrast between Fabianism and the Cooperative movement. But they may be willing to get involved in a local action aimed at winning a living wage from an exploitative employer. It might seem a small thing, but the positive results for that worker and her colleagues of getting involved in a campaign to win something concrete and achievable, go far beyond the victory itself.

What is gained is the knowledge of how to do politics, based on experience. The trade union movement and broad-based community alliances like London Citizens have shown this again and again. Business leaders don’t need lessons in how to put effective pressure on government, but ordinary people need to learn how to come together to develop an agenda that serves their interests, to plan strategy and build support. Direct

involvement in action teaches people how to turn up the heat on recalcitrant employers and hold politicians' feet to the fire if they don't keep their promises. And most importantly, coming together to win something teaches diverse communities how to build bridges, and combats the corrosive influence of the right-wing press that tells them to blame each other for their troubles.

Not just talking to ourselves

Left debate tends to be focused inwards, defined by its opposition to New Labour orthodoxies. Commentators call for a 'paradigm shift' on PFI, housing or immigration, citing (often with a sense of hurt bewilderment) the distance Labour has drifted from its 'socialist purpose'. But nowhere in all of this is a plan for getting out and talking to people about what their frustrations and aspirations are.

It is fine, for example, to assert the need to promote collective ownership over home ownership, as Duncan Bowie does in his recent Compass pamphlet (Bowie, 2008), but would it not be better to talk to people directly about what would make a real difference to them in terms of securing decent housing? When London Citizens did this in the run up to the 2008 Mayoral election, they found that people wanted the government to develop a real measure of what 'affordable housing' meant – and then build houses that could be bought or rented for that much – rather than offering them the vague promise of housing that turned out to be affordable only to those earning £40,000 or more (for a more detailed discussion of the 'listening campaign' run by London Citizens, see Littman, 2008).

People will only take action if campaigns arise out of their real, everyday concerns. Giving people space to tell their stories and put forward their priorities is the starting point for building our understanding of what needs to change. If we do that effectively then dissecting dominant ideologies seems much less important, because we have begun to develop understandings and objectives that are much more powerful and grounded.

Creating facts: showing that change is possible

Linked to our tendency to debate policy in the abstract is the left's belief that reforming government (or party) policies will lead – in the long run – to changes in real conditions for people on the ground. This is the equivalent of driving a car from the back seat with a stick.

A much more direct approach has been taken by groups involved in living wage campaigns who have convinced dozens of employers – including many of the high-powered tycoons that the government defers to – that taking the high road in employment policy is actually a good thing, both from a moral and a business perspective. Each victory brings serious and life-changing improvements for the workers and businesses involved, with measurable results in terms of reduced ill health, better productivity and lower levels of child poverty.

These real life examples help to undercut conservative arguments against higher pay, and to tie living wage policy closer to the government's own anti-poverty rhetoric. The

next time the government says 'we can't', we have unassailable proof to show that they can.

Power beyond the party

The British left is in a state of denial at the moment, unwilling to contemplate the loss of a Labour majority in the next election. We may complain about Labour's failures, but we know that there were gains too, and these are likely to be reversed by a Tory administration.

All the more reason to start developing practical campaigns on issues that really matter to people. A grass-roots movement actively fighting to implement a progressive agenda, can make the same demands of whoever is in power. They do not have to wait until Labour is elected or re-elected to push for change.

That was aptly demonstrated by the way in which Boris Johnson was held to his pledge to continue Ken Livingstone's London Living Wage policy. What persuaded him to adopt a position at odds with Tory policy was the power of over one hundred community organisations coming together to set their priorities for the city. If all hopes had been pinned on getting Livingstone re-elected, the London Living Wage might be a footnote in history by now.

And if in the end Labour does manage to pull the electoral rabbit out of the hat, there will be a strong, energetic, well organised movement ready to push them in the right direction.

If we want a model of this approach, we only have to look at the US. I am not starry-eyed about Barack Obama. No matter how progressive he appears now, if he is elected he will be under the same pressures as any other social democratic politician.

But Obama and his supporters have recognised that their only hope of withstanding the overbearing demands of the business community will be to have a very large, well-organised, vocal and politically skilful movement behind him – and also, to a degree, independent of him, ready to hold him to account. The lessons being learned by the local groups that have mushroomed in every state will be vital when Obama needs to stand up to the pharmaceutical industry's opposition to his healthcare plan or the oil companies' stonewalling on new emission controls.

The campaign has reached deep into the grassroots to recruit hundreds of thousands of new activists. And it is not passive support that these people are asked for, but 'roll-your-sleeves-up' participation that teaches them to raise money, hold meetings, tackle the press and reach out to previously untapped communities of new voters. Volunteers are meeting each other across class and ethnic lines in house meetings and neighbourhood barbeques, developing personal networks and gaining endorsements from the organisations – faith, community and ethnic groups – that they belong to.

There was originally scepticism on the part of the traditional Democratic machine. But these 'inexperienced campaigners' have proved to be an awesome force, raising millions in small donations and registering voters on a scale estimated to be 35 to 1 compared to the Republicans.

Many of these people are also getting active at a local level. They are electing

progressive Democrats to lower tier offices from sheriff to school board trustee, even in formerly bright red states like Idaho and Utah. Talking about Obama's volunteers in North Carolina, Terry Mansour says

They want to see (North Carolina) firmly in the Democratic camp, our electoral votes going to Obama. But even if they fail they tell me, they won't feel it was in vain. Hundreds of state and local Democrats will benefit from the Obama campaign's diligent work, as voters vote the straight Democratic Party ticket and bring them into office. And that will ensure that even if the battle for the presidency is lost here ... the war for control of the direction of the state and the nation will have been soundly won. (Mansour, 2008)

This is a lesson we could well afford to learn in the UK where political control of local authorities has slipped steadily through Labour's grip. It isn't just the big prize that matters. Local political engagement has the potential to win much more than one election, it can change the political landscape.

Breaking old habits

It will not be easy for groupings like Compass to leave behind their 'think-tank' habits. The normal routine of conferences and web discussions are familiar and comfortable territory. But there are ways of engaging members in building local coalitions that broaden out the movement and give people a real experience of social change. Here is one suggestion.

Compass has a dynamic membership, drawn to the organisation because they want to bring about social change. Many have contacts and affiliations in their local areas. Why not map the addresses of people on the mailing list and chose five pilot sites where there are concentrations of Compass supporters? In each pilot area, a meeting could be held to allow Compass-ites to network with each other.

These should *not* be passive, top table lecture to passive audience events. Instead they should be designed to find out who the participants are, what motivates them to be involved and what other organisations they belong to. Members could be encouraged to go out and talk to others in their own communities (perhaps using the house meeting model) to get soundings on what issues people care about locally.

Ultimately, each pilot group could chose one campaign – something achievable and capable of mobilising broad support – to take up and pursue. Pilot groups could come together from time to time to discuss their progress and the centrepiece of the next Compass conference could be a session on the lessons learned from the project.

Instead of sitting through a day of witty and acerbic critiques of what is wrong with Labour, we could then have an event that gave us real hope of changing it.

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