

Roundtable

Can Labour survive?

Steve Richards, Joy Johnson, and Paul Thompson

Chaired by Daniel Leighton

Renewal has been present since the conception of New Labour in the early 1990s, and has followed its trajectory, with increasing dismay, from insurgency to incumbency. Today there is a distinct feeling that the Labour Party could no longer be the sole or perhaps even primary vehicle for social democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

*In this roundtable we cut to the chase to ask whether Labour can survive, and whether we should care. Elisabeth Kubler Ross's *Of Death and Dying* sets out the sequence of emotions that people tend to go through during the grieving process. Her phases were Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and finally Acceptance. Many of these emotions have been evident in the pages of *Renewal* over the recent period, as they are at most contemporary gatherings of left activists and intellectuals. There certainly seems to be a fair amount of anger and depression in evidence. But one can well imagine that another round of bargaining will be on the table before anyone accepts that the patient's heart has stopped beating.*

Steve Richards

I'll start with my analysis of the current leadership crisis, as it is relevant to the debate we are having. Leadership crises are always more than just about the leader, however flawed that leader happens to be at any given time. They always tell you a great deal about the state a party is in. The reasons why the Labour Party is in crisis are complicated and deep, but one of its symptoms has been a whole series of leadership crises, of which this is just the latest.

If you look back at 2005, the day after Blair or New Labour won that third election there were calls for him to go. An unusual juxtaposition really, a Prime Minister having just won an election victory and being asked to go the next day. Now probably some of you were asking him to go, but that is symptom of a Party ill at ease with itself. You then had the attempted September coup in 2006, which produced the bizarre statement from Tony Blair that he was both going and staying; another extraordinary symptom of a Party in crisis.

You then had Brown's leadership contest, which wasn't a leadership contest: he was, as we know, crowned without a contest. There were, from Brown's perspective, several reasons for that: fear of debate, fear of exposing divisions which he knows exist, fear of being defined in any way at all. And then of course we have had the recent attempted coup in June, preceded by another attempt last September, and then there will be another one this September.

Now this is clearly about Brown but it is about much more than that. It is a Party that

RENEWAL Vol 17 No. 3 2009

lacks a clear sense of purpose, a clear sense of momentum, of what it is about. And that is when you have leadership crises.

Just to prove the point, if you look back at the Conservatives from 1997 onwards, they had a whole series of wacky leadership contests. I remember one of them in which Ken Clarke and John Redwood stood as a joint ticket. Now, they hadn't gone insane – though at their press conference I did wonder – rather, the Party was in a state of crisis. The appointment of Ian Duncan Smith – that was sign of a Party in a real state of crisis. Then there was the coronation of Michael Howard, an utterly bizarre event that happened suddenly in a couple of days. None of this addressed the fundamental crisis about the Tory Party, which was about its inability to adapt to the modern day (and incidentally has not yet been fully resolved).

So, yes: Labour is in crisis, to answer the first part of this question. Probably most of us would agree about its origins though be less clear about how it should be addressed. However, this is where I come on to the second element of this debate, about whether we should care.

On the stages of grief mentioned I recognise virtually all of them in one go today. And I'll tell you why I think this is dangerous. There seems to be an assumption that the Labour Party could die, and even if it is dying, lets bring in and celebrate the proliferation of other parties; let's engage with these increasingly stronger other parties.

And the reason why I'm wary of this is not because it's not a good idea (I think Caroline Lucas for example is a very interesting figure). But I remember (and hasten to add, I witnessed this as a student and not an experienced journalist) the early 1980s and similar things happening then. People in the Labour Party said that 'if David Owen and Shirley Williams want to leave, fine let them leave, let them set up their party and we'll carry on'. We know what happens in these situations where you get a contracting Labour Party, and other groups out there saying 'we can all work together in power, and form a progressive coalition'. It doesn't work like that. Remember all this will happen under the current electoral system, where the Conservatives can get in – they won't change the electoral system – and stay there for eighteen years.

But I can see the conversation moving in this direction. I was presenting *The Week in Westminster* with Matthew Taylor and Neal Lawson, talking about the future of Labour. Matthew said that from now on 'parties really don't matter that much, people will make decisions on a whole range of things, there is a divide about how you distribute power, but it's not a left/right one'.

Now actually if you look even at the last year and certainly the year to come, I can still make a very strong case for this government. It's weird, Brown is always accused of erecting these very artificial dividing lines, but it seems to me there was a real dividing line in the response to the economic crisis. Labour and the Liberal Democrats were together in recognising the need to intervene in a whole range of different ways, did so, and led the international co-ordination of the response in the economic crisis.

And the Conservatives were against – instinctively so. I still remember the day that Brown very reluctantly nationalised Northern Rock, Cameron and Osborne held a joint conference in which they couldn't contain their excitement: 'this is back to the 1970s, this a total disaster, this shows this government is over', and so on. Actually the government's action had the support of the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* and so on. It didn't get the support of Cameron and Osborne.

If you look at this debate about public spending, there is a big difference in the two parties as they go ahead. Of course Labour are going to have to cut like hell, but they are quite open about how they plan to do it over a longer period of time, and less intensively at first. The Conservatives, equally openly, have said they would have started cutting last year as a matter of principle. So there are still profound dividing lines. I don't buy this Matthew

Roundtable can labour survive?

Taylor line that they are all roughly the same, this idea we can have great dialogues with David Cameron and George Osborne about the redistribution of power. There is a huge difference still, in spite of all the faults of the government.

Another classic dividing line, which gets no attention at all, is this government's proposal, a really good one, to give training to every sixteen-year-old. I think that will have a profound effect on their lives. One Cabinet Minister was telling me that it's the people in his constituency that leave school at sixteen who end up being poorer than those who stay on, it's absolutely clear. The Conservatives are against the idea on lots of different grounds.

There are, then, still profound differences. But I sense a lapse into thinking that the other lot are pretty much the same, this lot has been a disaster, let's embrace the Greens, Respect or whoever it is. But the fact is under the current electoral system they won't get many seats, Labour won't get many either and the Tories will have a majority of about 220 – but that's fine because we'll be in this conversation with them as they redistribute power and will be almost the same as us economically? It won't be like that, but I can see that is the way that the narrative is going, and it is a dangerous narrative to buy into.

Joy Johnson

The question is: 'Can Labour survive?' And my answer is yes, and yes it must. I answer the second one: 'Do we want it to survive?' My answer is yes, and yes it must. What we don't want – and what I think we've seen – is we don't want *New Labour* to survive, and I think we have seen that *New Labour* can't survive.

If we look at the crisis, then it has the elements that Steve was obviously talking about, but it's not just the crisis of the Labour Party. We have a plethora of crises at the moment. We've got a crisis of the political class, we've got a crisis of the global economy, and we have a crisis of the Labour Party, and they're all mixed up. And as a former journalist, and Steve as a journalist will know, there's also talk of a crisis in journalism. So we have a crisis in a number of things.

Obviously *New Labour* won elections, but if John Smith had been alive he would have won an election, there's absolutely no doubt about that. So I never ever bought the idea that you need *New Labour* to win. I've never ever bought the idea that you need neo-liberal economics to win, never ever bought it, and now we're suffering from it. Because I not only think that John Smith would have won, he would have won a second time, probably even a third time frankly. The Tories were in such a catastrophic mess.

When people talk about the leadership contests, they say 'oh, the Tories manage to get rid of leaders left, right and centre', but they don't get rid of many Prime Ministers. They got rid of Margaret Thatcher. In my own view, I would have preferred that she had got kicked out at an election. So I've never really bought this 'let's get rid of the leader'. I've always thought that while you need leaders to craft the vision, sell the policies; you do need ideas, you do need policies, and our problems are not just Gordon Brown. Our problems are very deep-rooted and they primarily started with the war in Iraq. So get rid of Gordon Brown by all means, and then what would you have?

The other thing to say is that I think we are still a class-based Party. I hope we're a class-based Party, frankly. And I hope and I know that the reason that the Labour Party will survive is because the unions will make sure it survives. And I'm very pleased about that, because I think there's been a hollowing out of the Labour Party by *New Labour*, an attempt to diminish the power of the unions. Someone said to me when I actually worked for the Party way back in 1995, that they didn't want members, they wanted sponsors. Well, you reap what you sow. But the trade unions are still the bedrock of the Labour Party. If we abandon privatisation of the Royal Mail, they will reconnect.

RENEWAL Vol 17 No. 3 2009

The narrative has been set, Steve is right. The narrative on public service cuts, and getting rid of the debt and the deficit, has been set by the Institute of Fiscal Studies. Now their figures may be right, I don't know because I've never heard anybody refute them. But it has been set by the Institute of Fiscal Studies. The media, the right-wing media, has gone along with it in a very major way. I saw *Newsnight* the other day, when Andy Burnham had just been made Health Secretary, and he was asked 'what are you going to cut? What are you going to cut?' And his eyes popped, because he didn't know what to say. If you go back and have a look at the footage, you can see the discomfort that Burnham had, because he couldn't say: 'Well, we're going to cut Trident, we're going to cut ID cards'. Say you're going to cut Trident, say you're going to cut ID cards, and you make a connection. And then you can say: 'Right, we don't need to worry too much about the debt'.

There's this idea that you've got to pay off the debt now. You don't! But people want to know, faced with this deficit and public debt, what are you going to cut? And it shouldn't be determined by the media, by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, that the people who are going to suffer the cuts are the ones that didn't cause the crisis.

Kirsty Walk, when she interviewed Geoffrey Robinson about six weeks ago, asked 'Are you going to cut local government pensions?' And Geoffrey, being a very skilled politician, actually didn't answer her, and he said: 'That's not the question'. But the agenda has been successfully set by the Tories, the Institute of Fiscal Studies, and sections of the media.

And that's because, I personally think, that – and this has just hit me so you can knock it all down – that you've had a section of the Labour Party, people like Gordon Brown and so on, who had a set of principles, and then when they kept being defeated they switched the principles, and they don't have the compass that we have. They don't seem to have the compass, because otherwise it is not difficult to say 'we're going to abandon ID cards'. And it's not difficult in this international economic climate to say 'it's not the right time to go ahead, we don't have to have the Royal Mail privatisation'. And it's not difficult, with Obama talking about a non-nuclear world, to say 'we're going to abandon Trident'. None of these things are difficult. None of them would be difficult for any member of that government. It is because they are still so trapped by their history of defeat.

And I think that the question that's asked here is another example of defeatism. Gordon Brown hasn't set out a narrative. But then you hear David Miliband today saying 'oh, well, I was still thinking about resigning'. What's all that about? They're playing games, as Steve said to me earlier. They've got to get out of it, stop this defeatism. The Tories are not runaway successes. The European election was a disaster, there's no doubt about that. But somebody tell me that in the general election we're going to do as badly as fifteen per cent. I don't believe it, frankly.

I think we need to connect with the trade unions, connect with all these groups that we're talking about. One of the things that Caroline Lucas has said which really resonated with me was: 'We don't want a big tent. We want a campsite with lots of tents in it'. And I thought, well, you know, if we can get that campsite, and we have a Party – the trade union membership and other members who are prepared to work – then, frankly, we can, we shall, and we will survive.

Paul Thompson

Well I can't remember all those different emotions cited at the beginning but I think anger is pretty strong amongst them for me at the moment. That anger drove me to suggest this discussion. We posed it reasonably provocatively and there's nobody on this panel who is

Roundtable can labour survive?

going to say 'no the Labour Party doesn't matter'. Though I think I will probably take a harder line than the others.

I think there's three aspects to this question about whether something's finished or not. Is Labour finished? Is social democracy finished? Is New Labour finished? And they're all being conflated and confused. At the moment we're being told by all and sundry that both Labour and social democracy is finished.

Now setting aside social democracy, it may well happen that Labour is finished. And by finished we would basically mean that its share of the vote will sink so low that it would be effectively displaced as a serious force and something else – and under the existing electoral system it would have to be the Liberal Democrats – would be positioned as the alternative government, and to some extent – if the Tories were a significant majority, which they almost certainly will – would be, almost by default, the left-of-centre alternative, and they would have to play to those kind of rules.

As I said, that may happen. But if it happens it will be because of particular contingencies and choices – not some inexorable movement of sociology and history, which is what is getting dragged out at the moment: that there's some inexorable decline in Labour's position because of shifting social and class alignments.

I read Anatole Kaletky's article in the *Times* the other day that said that social democracy had been the living dead since the fall of the Berlin Wall (1). All of this is hogwash and it's not only hogwash, it's hogwash we've seen at least three times before in the post-war period – of actually identical arguments. In 1959 a book was written called *Must Labour Lose?* and the answer was actually 'yes, it must go on losing, because the working class has now shrunk to 0.1 per cent of the population', or whatever. It's the usual crap that they keep coming out with.

Now what is true is that there has been a significant social de-alignment over a long term between people's party loyalties and identities, and their social positions. But the paradox of that is that the instability and uncertainty that produces means that very little is permanent on the political landscape, so the idea of long-term secular decline in things is just a lazy argument that journalists love or academics love.

A very interesting example of this is the number of books that have been written over the past fifteen to twenty years in the US with titles like *The Oncoming Republican Majority*, or *The Oncoming Democratic Majority*. And, you know, the thing that almost always happens after that: complete reverse of what the book said. Seriously, there were two or three books, about five or six years ago, that said that the Democrats could not win under any circumstances; they could elect the man from Mars and they wouldn't win. And now Democrats are making the completely opposite mistake and all these books are coming out, like 'Ha! Latinos – they're going up, and these groups are going up, and Republicans can never win again'. Now Republicans are extremely stupid – because, for example, of their opposition to a Latino supreme court judge just because they're Latino; that's going to piss off very large numbers of people for no point at all. But everything is to play for in these highly volatile circumstances. So there's no long term secular decline.

It is true that it is apparently paradoxical that in European elections the populations are turning predominantly to the centre-right rather than to the centre-left. You can give all kinds of explanations for this. One is the European elections are not necessarily typical of elections *per se*. Secondly, of course, a number of the centre-right parties are actually more social democratic than New Labour. We saw that at the G20. So again, we need to be very careful of easy arguments.

One thing is absolutely clear: 'New Labour' is finished. It's not that there aren't any New Labour people, and they can't still annoy you intensely, and they've been there forever, and not resigned when they should have done, and so on. But as a political project

RENEWAL Vol 17 No. 3 2009

New Labour has been 'dead man walking' for at least five years. We said this in *Renewal* a long time ago. Neal, Sue Goss and I had said this in an editorial following the last European elections; we could have just reprinted it for today (2).

But in the 2005 general election the only message Labour had was that the Tories were going to be even worse than us. And that is the only message – that the Tories will cut more than us – which they will play at the next election. The electorate has seen through this charade. It saw through this in 2005, but sat on its hands and didn't vote. And Labour was joyfully pleased that virtually no one voted for them but still they got into government. They really didn't care.

So New Labour as a political project has completely ground to a halt. They have been becalmed and bewildered as to what their role is in government. They hit lucky with the long boom, and basically made a Faustian pact with markets; that they would take the benefits of markets and put it into public investment. Fair enough. But that completely removed any willingness, not that they had much in the first place, to make a critique of markets and the price that they were going to pay.

In relation to the Party – I remember well when New Labour first came in, it was openly said by people like Peter Mandelson that you didn't need activists any more for a political party. Well, we haven't got any now. So that's a prediction that has certainly come true. But you can't win or even survive an election campaign without at least more activists than we've got at the moment. So New Labour is dead as an electoral project; it's dead as an organisational form. It's just that its zombie-like features are still carrying on.

However we can't just laugh about this, because there is an agency problem. I'm a left social democrat. If I thought there was a more viable vehicle for left social democracy in Britain, I'd be off. I am a bit of a Labour tribalist because, like a lot of people, I've put a lot of my emotional and practical investment in it. But I'm also a rationalist and I'd be off if there was something better that was more viable as a *governance* project. Because social democracy is not about protest, it's about governance. It's about regulating capitalism on grounds of equity and solidarity and so on. Which is not to say New Labour's been doing it, but it is what social democracy's about.

For anyone who's got any illusions about this look at Scotland, where I've lived for quite a while. In Scotland we've had Proportional Representation (PR). We've already had the consequences of this. This is not to say I'm not in favour of it, for a long time I've been in favour of PR. But the idea that there's some red-green nirvana around the corner when you've got PR isn't the reality – the Scottish Socialist Party got less votes than the British National Party in the Euro elections; their politics are the usual jumped-up utopianism anyway. There is no sense that the Greens are articulating a governance project, they are happy to campaign on particular issues and lucky now and again to be invited into the tent to influence a particular decision. That is what would happen.

You have to have agency. This brings me finally to Gordon Brown. I think Compass made a mistake not helping to plunge the knife in. I'm not privy to the inner working of Compass, but I think I can guess at the things that were floating around.

One is that they bought this ridiculous line that there is a Blairite plot to unseat Gordon Brown. I don't make any distinction between the Brownites and the Blairites, and I think anyone who does hasn't learnt anything from this history of New Labour. Gordon Brown made the odd noise in the run up to his election, which encouraged us to foolishly believe that things might be different. It hasn't been any different. He was one of the architects of the New Labour project, and it isn't going to change in any significant way.

So I would rather have a half-competent New Labour person that the public might be prepared to vote for, rather than one that the public hates and can't even articulate the

Roundtable can labour survive?

rubbish politics which they've got at the moment. There is parallel here with 1983 and Foot. I remember sitting in a room in a Liverpool Labour left meeting, arguing that we should replace Michael Foot with Dennis Healey. I was then denounced in *Labour Briefing* for this. My line was, if you're going to be defeated, you may as well try and rescue something from that if possible. And I feel the same way now.

I don't know what we can rescue from the wreckage of New Labour and the election to come. What I do know is that playing this game of keeping your knife sheaved, because either the Blairites are around the corner, or the other argument: 'oh, we know it all has to be changed, but let's wait until after the general election, and we'll pick up the pieces then'... My line is simple: I think that under the leadership of someone like Alan Johnson we have at least a possibility of making some realignment of people and policy. Under Brown we have none. We'll survive a little better. The post-election situation will require political forces outside Labour in a long-term rebuilding of a social democratic project in the UK. But if you want to pick up the pieces after the election, you've got to be sure that there are going to be enough pieces to pick up.

Steve Richards

In case you think there's been too much agreement: I agree with most of the points Joy made in policy terms; I don't think the solution is just a reconnection with the trade unions. I forgot to say that I think it would be a terrible mistake to work on a casual assumption that it would be alright for the Labour Party to die, but by implication, I should have added, I think it needs massive, massive reform. But not simply a reconnection with the trade unions, I don't think that would do it. In fact in some ways I'm slightly worried about what would happen if that was the essence of the change.

I see the Labour Party as the agent of change but how – I didn't hear from you Paul about the how – I think it's very difficult, very complicated.

I think the expenses thing, in a strange way, although it has fuelled this great parliamentary crisis is, first, very easy to solve, and they'll solve it, and it's never going to happen again. It's the most straightforward crisis I've come across in recent times. You know: external regulation, transparency, sorted. But second, one of the positive consequences might be a widening of the range of candidates and how you get those candidates in. I know tonnes of people who'd be brilliant MPs and who want to do it and are blocked very early on because of the narrow ways these people are selected. So who knows, maybe something good will come of it, and that might fuel the reform of this only agency of change available to us – if we're working on the assumption that it's the only agency available to us, which I think is probably a wise one.

One of the most dangerous words is 'inevitable'. I keep reading column after column: 'it is inevitable that the Conservatives are going to win the next election with a big majority. And so all that matters is let's look at what they're about'. Well actually you don't get that second sentence – hardly anyone scrutinises them at all. But I do actually, I read all their stuff and speak to them. And they are at the equivalent of Labour in the late 80s.

They have made a spectacularly successful tonal change: I've described Cameron publicly as 'pitch perfect'. The policies don't relate to the tone quite often – look at their policies on Europe, or public spending, or a whole range of other things – in same way as when Labour's rose replaced its red flag. They're at that stage.

But everyone says 'oh it's certain they're going to win the next election'. Now every Labour MP I speak to says it. Well that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. But if you actually look at their policies, look at the level of support they're getting in the polls it's not inevitable at all. But the more people say it is, it will become so.

RENEWAL Vol 17 No. 3 2009

However Labour has got to start getting its act together to change the narrative. Because it has provided the media with non-stop turbulence, as I say from literally the day after the 2005 election. One argument for changing the leader was that the narrative would have changed, you've shaken everything up. And I think it would have done. I don't buy the thing that the media would then have been obsessed with then saying 'right, you've got to call an election immediately'. I think the media, knowing how it works, for about a week at least, would have given Johnson a honeymoon and it would have been 'this postman's got into Number Ten', and 'hold on a second what are these Tories all about'. It would have briefly put the microscope on them.

I don't see how the microscope goes on them – and if it did they'd be in real trouble – while this leadership carries on. Because it remains the compelling narrative, and the media can only focus on one narrative at a time. But if it did, the Tories are not as robust as they appear to be, by any means.

Paul Thompson

Labour needs a political narrative which actually connects to people's experience of their society and of their work.

The word 'capitalism' has not passed the lips of any significant figure in the Labour Party for a very long time, which is a mistake, because in order to regulate something, you have to know what the something is. What we got told over and over again for the past fifteen years, was 'we've got this fab, lovely, cuddly thing called the "knowledge economy".' Remember the knowledge economy? You don't hear Gordon Brown going to the G20 saying things like 'we've really got to fix this crisis in the knowledge economy'. Because there isn't a knowledge economy. There's knowledge-intensive *sectors* in a *capitalist* economy. And we have this beast called financialised capitalism which is now in systemic crisis.

We have to speak to people's experience of this, not dust down Clause IV and resuscitate all that kind of stuff all over again. And it can be done. Because there is a politics of re-regulation which will actually make businesses better and more robust, and jobs better, and pensions better.

But we ain't getting it. What we're getting is: 'press the "reset" button'. The impression New Labour are giving is: 'let's just get through the recession and get growth going again', as if they've learned absolutely nothing from the previous period.

I don't know enough about what is the state of play in various areas to know whether there is a cohort of people who could replace Labour MPs being thrown out because of the expenses scandal. To be honest I suspect that there isn't. That's a different point to whether there's another cohort or pool of people who are capable of doing that. Because the only left who are active, as opposed to the 'reserve army of Labour' which is people who are still members but will not knock on doors to be defending ID cards and Christ knows what – that cohort of people I suspect is not there at the moment. But I just don't know enough about it.

One thing is clear though: any even partial renewal of the Labour Party is going to have to inject some fairly fundamental party democracy that we've completely lost in the past ten to fifteen years. Because without voice mechanisms you don't get activity and this is what members have learned. And all this crap it's been replaced with, these policy forums, which are just waffle shops which never go anywhere – I wouldn't mind if they did, but it's just waffle for no purpose whatsoever.

I'm a little bit more pessimistic on the narrowing of the gap, not because I think that anything is inevitable, but because something would have to change for that gap to be narrowed. Now it will narrow from the fifteen per cent. Clearly the issue is can it go beyond

Roundtable can labour survive?

21 or 22 per cent? Only if Brown went and there was some significant change. It wouldn't have to be a lot. The British public would be relatively grateful – like the rest of us – for small mercies.

Joy Johnson

The reason I talked so much about the unions is that I fear that at gatherings I've been to, the unions are dealt with, if not hostilely, then certainly not with any enthusiasm. And I still think they're the mechanism for organised labour, we should be encouraging trade unions and we should be encouraging trade union members. I probably went a bit over the top in my comments, but you still hear the assumption that 'the unions don't get it'. Well I don't buy that argument, the unions do get it, they get all the policy that's required, they do get it.

But I also think the Caroline Lucas campsite for all the NGOs and other progressive forces is definitely needed. We can't do it alone.

Paul Thompson

Political problems can't be solved by an act of will. This is what you get from the Party: you get these terrible messages: you pick up the phone and it's Harriet Harman on the phone saying 'get down to your local Labour Party immediately or you've had it'. People are fed up – Labour activists have either left in disgust at the policies or they're just biding their time until some better signal comes along. You can't exhort people to do things they don't want to do.

And the same goes for the electorate – actually there is a settled will among the bulk of the electorate. Not only has New Labour lost the will to govern, the electorate has lost the desire to be governed by New Labour. This is irresistible if you actually look at the voting trend at the moment. And no amount of exhortation that the public should fall back in love with New Labour because the Tories would be even worse will work, partly because, as Steve said, under Cameron they are a much smarter machine that can smooth away some of those things where the old fear factor would come in.

I'll end on simply saying this. One can make the argument that New Labour was necessary in the period when it emerged. We can kick this about. But the idea that the electorate is fundamentally governed by a fear or hatred of the left is so far from accuracy. And I say this not because there's not some leftist thing waiting to burst out of me like the alien. I spent twenty years defeating the far left and doing it extremely successfully so that New Labour could be born.

But the fact is we lost considerable support in the 2005 election both in, if you like, our core working class support and amongst those middle class professionals which were at the core of the alliance that got us into power. It's a complete myth that aspirational or working class or lower-middle class voters are motivated by some incredible right wing ideology so that if we mention any progressive policy whatsoever they will run for cover. Who was taking seats off us in the 2005 election? The Liberal Democrats. When I go on the streets in my Edinburgh constituency, which we hold, the abuse I was getting was about all the issues which the sensible left was actually making a stand on.

New Labour is living in a world that basically disappeared two decades ago, where the left was the problem and the British electorate was fundamentally unreconstructed Conservative, and it's just not moved on. We have to move on.

New Labour keeps on picking the wrong fights on the wrong issues. The Post Office privatisation is a classic. Who exactly is this policy popular with? New Labour loves opinion polls until opinion polls tell them things that they don't want to hear. The public is not in favour of partial, full, little, big, any kind of privatisation of the Post Office. The

RENEWAL Vol 17 No. 3 2009

employees are certainly not. The only people who are in favour of it are those scavengers in the business community who can make a quick buck on the base of it. And the fact is that is fairly typical.

New Labour lost that plot. We can be electable a sensible four or five degrees to the left, and we'd be a lot better off.

Joy Johnson

I think the idea that you've got to part-privatise the Royal Mail, this three-hundred-year institution, and that is popular, is complete nonsense. In fact you'd find people in the leafy suburbs probably support the Royal Mail as much as anybody. When Margaret Thatcher was asked about privatising the mail – I think it was the '87 election, at a press conference – she said 'It's the *Royal Mail!* You don't privatise the *Royal Mail!*'.

The left did badly elsewhere in Europe but in fact Sarkozy pinched the language that we should have been using on banks and capitalism, and the Anglo-Saxon model; and Angela Merkel tacked left – she was definitely more left than we were on state intervention.

I agree these are huge problems – I don't live in some kind of false illusion. But I don't buy the idea that Royal Mail privatisation is popular. I didn't buy the idea that part-privatisation of the Tube was popular, frankly I would take it back. I'd take the railway back. And I don't think that would be unpopular.

Paul Thompson

Given my position that it's important to salvage something from the present debacle, I know I should say 'go back to your Labour branches' and so on. But it doesn't work for me. I will work at the next election, partly because my MP Mark Lazarowicz voted against the Iraq war, and is generally one of the better MPs. But moral exhortation without significant change is not going to work.

The public wants an honest conversation about the political differences. What I really fear is what we'll get is a rerun of 2005 where the only thing will be 'Tories = more cuts, even worse', and they'll stick to a line, driving us all mad. But if we could find four or five key issues that we can actually energise our base and fight around, then fine.

I'll end on this point about Compass – I think that Compass's basic political perspective and strategy, which is not to rely on throwing everything into the Labour basket, is exactly right. Because if we're going to have an election campaign – particularly one without a changed Labour leadership – the only the way that the issues we want to see debated is if a broader progressive coalition pushes those things onto the agenda. If that can connect with at least some push inside Labour, then great. But I think it's naive to think that the current situation is going to drive New Labour on its own to something that is different from before.

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Roundtable can labour survive?

Notes

1. 'Labour stumbles closer to historical oblivion', *The Times*, 11.06.2009.
2. Lawson, N, Thompson, P. and Goss, S. (2004) '(Not) as good as it gets', *Renewal* 12 (3).