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While the new political landscape offers great challenges for the left, there are opportunities to build a powerful new coalition – if social democratic parties are able to recognise them and respond. For the Labour party, the crux of this lies in learning to collaborate and combine, rather than control and capture: to work alongside the new forces of energy in society, but not try to co-opt them.

We are living in a political age where the extraordinary has become commonplace and where events unfold without any regard for the conventional rulebook. In the UK, we have witnessed Jeremy Corbyn's unexpected and unstoppable rise to the summit of Labour politics, and the SNP's complete reshaping of the contours of Scottish democracy. UKIP has emerged as a major force in England and Wales; there has been talk of a 'Green surge'; we might even remember Cleggmania. This list includes small tremors and major tectonic shifts, but each tells of how, as the *Guardian* journalist John Harris put it, "around once a year now, something bubbles to the surface that shows how broken mainstream politics has become".

This sense of disruption has been felt in different ways right across Europe. Traditional political parties have been buffeted by forces that they seem incapable

of understanding, as they struggle to speak to the rise in identity politics, the consequences of globalisation and the changing instincts of a fast moving society. From crisis-struck Greece to the social democratic mecca of Scandinavia, insurgents, populists and pirates are blowing a whirlwind through the political establishment.

In electoral terms, it is parties of the centre-left who appear to be struggling the most. Despite a post-crash period that saw a sense of tumult pervade public life, the UK has its first majority Conservative government in nearly two decades. As Nick Pearce, former director of the IPPR, has pointed out, few European social democratic parties now manage to attract upwards of 30 per cent of the vote in national elections, whereas the conservative instincts of an ageing population are providing a bedrock of support for the centre-right.

So what are the changing conditions of our democracy? And while it seems clear that the edifice of traditional social democracy is crumbling, can something new be reshaped from the rubble?

Disconnection and decline

Part of what we are seeing is the consequence of the long-term dealignment of the political system and the decline of traditional party loyalties. In the UK, the high watermark of the two party system was 1951, where a worn out Labour government lost the general election even though it won the popular vote and secured the largest ever number of votes for social democracy. Labour and the Conservatives won 97 per cent of the vote between them. Since then we have witnessed a steady reduction in the number of people supporting the two main parties – from 89 per cent in 1970 to 65 per cent in 2010. It ticked up a bit in 2015 to 67 per cent, as the Conservatives found a way to defy political gravity and increase the vote share of a

governing party, mostly at the expense of their partners in power, the Liberal Democrats, who collapsed entirely. This has often been the fate of junior coalition partners across the EU, as the FDP in Germany and most recently the Irish Labour party show.

A second big trend is the ever-decreasing trust in political parties. There has been an arms race between pollsters to find the most shocking comparator for the public's disdain for their elected representatives – one poll in the US found Congress was less popular than cockroaches. The most recent Ipsos MORI poll in the UK settled for reiterating that yes, in 2016 politicians remain less trusted than estate agents, journalists and bankers. Peter Mair – whose *Ruling the Void* has quickly become the classic tome in charting the rise a professional political class and their uncoupling from their electorates – describes this process as not so much loss of trust but growing indifference: “it is important to recognise that politics and politicians might simply be deemed irrelevant by many ordinary citizens.” It is undoubtedly true that people have a sense that politics is a game, being played for the amusement of a disconnected few who are entirely removed from real life. But alongside indifference is increasing evidence of anger at a rarefied elite. Recent Fabian focus groups found visceral hostility when people were asked for the first thing that came into their minds when they think about politicians: “above everyone else” and “not like us” were some of the most commonly heard responses.

The most obvious expression of this trend has been declining participation in elections. In the UK this journey reached its nadir in 2001, when the re-election of Tony Blair's government only managed to rouse 59 per cent of registered voters to the polls. In the recent general election, a tight contest, good weather and the prospect of a hung parliament led to high hopes for a significant fillip, but turnout only crept up by 1 percentage point. Particularly

worrying was that Ipsos MORI found the patterns of differential turnout – what the IPPR has called “turnout inequality” – remained unchanged. 18–24 year-olds are almost half as likely to vote as those aged 65, and we see much lower turnout among lower income groups, those who rent their homes, and BAME communities.

As pollsters and pundits have discovered to their cost, predicting how these trends will manifest themselves next week is a fraught business, let alone in 10 years’ time. But what we can see clearly is that our politics is becoming more fluid, more plural, less hierarchical and decidedly undeferential.

What’s left?

These are the political trends that are affecting all western democracies in the 21st century. But they have combined with wider changes in our economy and society to present mainstream parties of the left with a particular existential challenge. The changing nature of the economy and the work we do – discussed in detail elsewhere in this book – means the very conditions in which mass social democratic parties emerged have changed irrevocably. Jon Cruddas and Jonathan Rutherford observed before the last election that “in the last 30 years, the shift from an industrial to a service economy has caused dramatic changes in the nature of working life, from full-time work mainly done by men to increasingly decentralised and more flexible forms of employment.” This means social democratic parties have lost their “social anchorage in the coalitions built up around the old industrial working class ... Once great ruling parties have become hollowed out and are in danger of shrinking into professionalised political elites.”

This is the nexus that makes the trends that are reshaping our politics, our economy and our society so toxic for mass social democratic parties. Labour’s historic cultural

connection with particular places, and its presence in the fabric of specific communities, has been severed. It has been replaced by a professional political class who know the corridors of Westminster but not the contours of everyday life. A political party system that no longer seems to reflect life as it is lived today is particularly damaging for a party that sprang directly from its challenges.

As this disconnection grows, the left is missing democratic energy that may not see much use for party politics, but is flourishing in many corners of the country. As Graeme Cooke wrote in *Still Partying Like It's 1995*, "while formal democratic involvement is more fragile, other forms of civic and political participation are holding up and finding new avenues of expression". So while membership of political parties and trade unions has generally been falling, single issue campaigns and 'clickivism' have been thriving, driven by technology and sitting more comfortably with the lifestyles and preferences of a new generation of activists. It remains to be seen whether the influx of new Labour party members and supporters Jeremy Corbyn's leadership campaign inspired was a rekindling of the former or a manifestation of the latter.

Outside the sphere of politics, we can see democratic strength in the healthy membership numbers of many large charities, in particular environmental charities. We are also witnessing what the author Henry Hemming calls the growing "power of association". Hemming suggests that under the radar of mainstream politics, there are as many as 1.5 million small groups – from sports teams and book clubs to choirs and parks friends groups – who regularly come together around common interests. The Fabian Society report *Pride of Place* showed the strong connection people have to the places they live and the people they live there with, and how this resonant attachment to place forms a bedrock for local social action.

This is evidence of a strong culture of joining and doing things together, of a sense of community that can grow in both the physical and digital realm. But it is one that is different from before, that the traditional structures of political parties have not responded to. The union branch, the labour club, the constituency Labour party: these are no longer the places people go to associate and take collective action. So the challenge for parties of the left is whether they can join with the joiners, or whether they will remain a class apart.

Collaboration not control

So while the new political landscape offers great challenges for the left, there are opportunities to build a powerful new coalition – if social democratic parties are able to recognise them and respond. There is clear evidence of a deep democratic instinct, and new technologies are emerging all the time that make it much easier to bring people together around shared interests. What's more, in Britain, the political momentum behind devolution to our cities and counties presents creative space for the development of a more participatory politics; so too, perhaps, does an electoral system that is struggling to cope with the fracturing of two-party politics.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity lies in how social democrats respond to solving their hardest problem. The traditional political offer of mainstream parties of the left – of increased spending to improve public services during periods of economic growth – has been put out of reach by fiscal deficits and the reduced agency of central states. So social democrats have little option other than to use this moment to discover a new purpose and find a new language, that goes beyond an orthodox politics of tax and spend. The paradox for the left is that it will never be allowed to take control of the levers of the state until it convinces that this is not the entirety its political project.

For the Labour party, this will require a political tradition that is over a century old, with entrenched structures, mindset and assumptions, to change in some fairly fundamental ways. It will need to find the wherewithal to completely reinvent its culture and way of practising politics, at a time when it is at a historically low ebb. It must be viewed as an open question as to whether this is possible. But if it cannot, it seems likely that an institution that fundamentally changed the course of the 20th century will find itself redundant in the 21st.

Labouring on

At the crux of this lies Labour's instinct to control. The Labour party seeks to scoop up energy in support of electing Labour governments, who then aim to 'deliver Labour values' through the machinery of the state. But today's political culture is plural, non-deferential and non-bureaucratic, so the big question is whether a machine party with rigid structures built for another time can be flexible enough to meld with it. Instead of seeking to capture, Labour will need to learn to collaborate and combine: to work alongside the new forces of energy in society, to conjoin with them, but never try to co-opt them. This is made harder of course by the fact that those forces are mostly suspicious of the Labour party's motives and that Labour is seeking to build a relationship within a very shallow puddle of trust.

There are three ways Labour might look to begin rebuilding its relationship with the British people over the coming months and years.

The first is about tone. John Harris described the assets that set Jeremy Corbyn apart from his rivals last summer as "clarity, moral oomph and an evident sense of purpose." These are qualities that have not come easily to the special adviser generation who have led Labour politics in recent years. The key thing that is said to unite

those politicians who are successfully breaking through the white noise of professional politics is 'authenticity'. Authenticity is a slippery concept – you know it when you see it – and Labour's attempt to find more of it usually begins and ends with a call for more working class MPs. This would help, of course: our parliament should aspire as much as possible to look like the country it is supposed to represent. But it is not their class profile that defines the politicians we think of as being 'authentic': look at Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage or Donald Trump. What's more, in the Labour party, 'more working class MPs' tends to be mistranslated as 'more trade union officials', who in reality exist in much the same professional policy milieu as the rest of the political class. Research for the *Fabian Review* before the last election found that while Labour had selected fewer special advisers in its key seats, the growing number drawn from the third sector fed "a perception of a revolving door between Whitehall, Westminster and 'charity street'".

No, what authenticity means here is less about who you are and where you come from, and more about what you say and whether we believe you. This is particularly crucial for establishing trust with a generation of voters who are relentlessly marketed at and pitched to every waking moment. We know that the public's greatest bugbear about politicians is their refusal to 'give straight answers to straight questions'. So we need a Labour culture in Westminster that is able to speak clearly and convincingly about what it thinks and why – and is prepared to give honest 'don't knows' when it doesn't – rather than the torturous circumlocution and angle-playing of recent years. Good judgement, sound principles and the ability to inspire – rather than message discipline, policy expertise or facility with political chicanery – should be the key qualities we look for from our political candidates and leaders.

Second, Labour politicians must start to look beyond ‘policy’. Policy has been Labour’s *modus operandi*, to the exclusion of almost everything else. But research during the 2015 election campaign by BritainThinks showed the ultimate limits of this. A panel of swing voters tracked their day-to-day experiences of the election via a smartphone app – just one in five entries referred to policy, despite this being the entire focus of Labour’s campaign. At the end of the campaign, when asked what the Conservatives stood for, the swing voters’ answer was clear: they had a ‘long-term economic plan’. For Labour this question was greeted by deafening silence or a rag-bag of micro measures, from zero-hours contracts to banning unpaid internships. After five years, the British people didn’t know who the Labour party was or what it stood for.

The traditional tools of policymaking have been undermined, by the long shadow cast by the financial crisis on the public finances, the crisis of political trust, and the increasingly complex nature of social problems. What’s more, as a political proposition, policy tends to divide more than it unites: it separates the political class from everyone else (*we give you* something) and pits one group of people against another (someone else isn’t getting it). Labour’s political challenge is so multifaceted that trying to find retail policy offers to appeal to each constituent part of an election-winning coalition will leave the party with a very confusing looking shopping basket, and heighten the sense that it doesn’t stand for anything in particular.

Instead, the job of political leaders should be something else: to found institutions and inspire collective action. Rather than pulling levers, setting targets or repurposing budgets, we need politicians to do fewer, bigger things. We need our leaders to grapple with the big issues of the age that unite us all – whether that is integrating health and social care or creating a carbon neutral economy – and create institutions and co-ordinated systems that empower

and include. So when presented with a problem, the Labour movement should not first reach for a policy solution, but an organising one. This is particularly relevant at a time when Labour is out of power in Westminster. So, rather than hectoring that George Osborne's 'national living wage' isn't a real living wage, and promising that a future Labour government would go further to tackle low pay, local Labour parties could start making a difference tomorrow by joining with workplace living wage campaigns.

This leads to the third big task for Labour politics: to spend much more time building trusting relationships in particular places and communities. This insight was recognised during the last parliament when Arnie Graf, the US community organiser, was brought in to conduct a root and branch review of the party. The aim was to shift activity away from knocking on doors and depositing leaflets towards building community power. This was, however, quickly sidelined – which highlights Labour's cultural allergy towards an approach to politics that is about more than policy, and an approach to organising that is about more than clipboards and voter ID. Graf wrote last summer of his experience and observed that Labour's organisers spend so many hours on data collection, they have very little time to do what should be the most crucial aspect of their work: meeting new people and establishing new relationships. Graf recommends that half of all organisers should be freed up for the exclusive pursuit of this task. This would not only begin the slow process of getting to know the country again, Graf says "this work will lead to numerous local campaigns and show people that the Labour party is the place to go if you want to get things done." Showing rather than telling is crucial to winning back trust.

Through Arnie Graf's work, the Labour party seems to already have within its orbit a model of politics that

responds to the challenges of the age. Whether the party recognises this and acts upon it is a big test of whether it is capable of leading itself back to life. And if it is not, then this is what the new groups in the party that are emerging like Momentum and Labour Together should do. In this way they could try and harness the energies of the people who have joined the party in recent months and who will presumably quite quickly decide they have much better things to do with their time than sit and debate internal resolutions. Clearly there is also a huge leadership task here for Labour's local centres of power, as councils reinvent their role in the face of severe budgets cuts, away from a delivery model towards a convening one. Councillors are increasingly acting as 'community champions', leading citizens through the process of taking more responsibility rather than sitting in meetings to decide what things to do for them. Labour culture tends to look upwards for answers, to gaze longingly towards Westminster for a unified programme handed down by a heroic leader. Instead, it must look outwards: to the sources of strength that exist both within the Labour movement and beyond it, and humbly seek to build alliances with it.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE: DEMOCRACY

Is democracy dying? The increasing prevalence of abstentions, of invalid or blank votes; the ongoing decline of affiliation to parties and unions; the anti-political torrents released every day on social media: all these things seem to suggest that our parliamentary democracies are in a sorry state.

And as a matter of fact, they are. The spirit of democracy itself remains strong, however. By declining to vote, or voting for anti-establishment parties, disillusioned citizens are expressing their rejection of a power monopolised by a professionalised political class. Citizens' anger demonstrates the strength of their democratic convictions.

The left listen. We were born out of an outpouring of anger against a 'state power' concentrated in the hands of a few, confiscated by the 'power of money'. However, by participating in the exercise of power, we risk no longer embodying resistance to the establishment, but becoming part of it.

Other left-wing groups, born from anti-austerity movements, groups for the protection of tenants or consumers, and artists' collectives, are reinventing democratic practices, and rediscovering the ambitions that we had at the beginning. They are our allies by definition.

Let us have the courage to put our democratic convictions into practice, and draw lots for secondary chambers in our parliaments and our regional and local assemblies. Having citizens chosen by lot to form regularly elected assemblies can only reinvigorate the left. It forces elected representatives to enter into dialogue with citizens, just as doctors and educators are learning to collaborate with their increasingly informed patients and students. Their point of view can help to broaden ours, whilst our experience can enrich their civic culture – and remove the lure of populism through a respectful dialogue, showing the constraints of collective action as well as its force.

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