

# **The Fifth Tradition**

How Labour can renew itself for the 2010s

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# Chapter 1: Why the Labour party still matters to the left

## Introduction

The election is lost. As I write this, David Cameron is starting his first night in 10 Downing Street, and the resistance against the cuts must start, alongside Labour fightback. Labour will only fight back effectively if it rediscovers the best of its past, and casts off the worst. This is what this (as yet unfinished) essay is about.

And so in this essay I'll be examining, from a determinedly left wing perspective, the following ideas:

1. Why the Labour party still matters to the left, despite (or perhaps even because of) the last 12 years in government, and why the Labour party is not beyond recall;
2. Why and how the current economic situation remains an opportunity for the Labour left to push forward its agenda;
3. Why the Labour left now needs to recognise the best of its history and achievements, for lessons on how to react to the current circumstances, while moving away from some of the invasive traditions which have done so much to harm the labour movement in the last thirty years, and in so doing how the Labour party can recreate itself as a, or even the party for the 21st century.

It will come as no surprise, to those who have read any of my previous writings as they have moved from an assessment of [how the Labour left failed the working class](#) and towards [a call for a new economic 'narrative'](#), that there will be a focus on the need to re-establish at the heart of the Labour party the 'primacy of the working class', but that we must do so by establishing a narrative of what the working class is, and (to paraphrase Compass) [how it lives in the 21st century](#).

4. How the left within and around Labour party can re-energise itself at local level.

In particular I will contend – and I think this will be the most controversial, even counter-intuitive aspect – that the local left-led Labour parties must kick back against the managerialist approach adopted by Labour's hierarchy, challenge the notion that a good local party is a 'campaigning party' (ultimately to the exclusion of all else), and re-politicise themselves as guardians of 21st century working class interests.

5. The particular challenges that face the Labour left at local government level, an essential (though sometimes overplayed) aspect of the political arena, and how Labour councillors need to consciously rise to the challenge of re-politicizing their role, so as to become not just a local but a national force once again (*unfinished*).
6. A summary piece on how Labour can and must develop a 'fifth tradition' if it is serve a useful purpose in the 21st century, and how it may die if it does not. This fifth tradition, I will suggest will need both to build on and supersede the four broad traditions of the Labour movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

- The long established left tradition, from the ILP onwards and through Miliband etc., which regards a focus on parliamentary politics as at best a distraction, at worst a betrayal;
- The other long established tradition, broadly called labourist, which has no truck with revolutionary politics and is content with operating within the parliamentary system;
- A tradition that started with entryism into the Labour party in the late 1970s and early 1980s of a variety of groupings for whom class politics no longer had primacy, and for whom 'identity politics' (itself influenced by the social currents of the 1960's) was the hallmark – a well-meaning but [intellectually flawed politics](#) which I would contend was actually more damaging to the longevity of the first tradition than was the more overtly oppositional second tradition ;
- A more recent tradition still, commencing in the early 1990s, and in main part a reaction to continued national electoral defeat, influenced heavily by Putman and Etzioni's essentialist communitarianism, and accepting neoliberal socio-economics, globalisation and the freemarket as the sine qua non of a 'progressive' Britain. This is the dominant though certainly not unchallenged tradition in the parliamentary party at the moment, and has few substantive links to the other, earlier traditions.

If that sounds ambitious stuff for a blog that not that many people read, that's because it is.

If it sounds wildly optimistic, given the current somewhat jaundiced public view of the Labour party and its prospects in the coming period of opposition, that's because I am optimistic. Otherwise I wouldn't be committing myself to several thousand words that relatively few people will read.

### **The Labour party and me**

I am optimistic about the future of the Labour party.

I still think that the Labour party offers the best organizational structure for the representation of the interests of the working class in Britain, though as I will explore in chapter 3 and again in chapter 6, such representation must necessarily have an international dimension, and I am less convinced of its capacity in this respect.

I know such a view is controversial. I have lost count of the blog comments I have seen where members of the Labour left are 'advised', with differing degrees of courtesy, that if they really are socialists, they should leave the Labour party today. [Here](#) is just the most recent one – I don't keep a proper record.

So I think it's right to start out by establishing why I think the Labour party is the right place for people on the left in Britain to be.

First, though, I should stress that my belief in the Labour party does not come from any emotional bond. I am not one of those who says things like: 'I will never leave the Labour party, because it is in my blood', because it is not in my blood.

I've only been a member since 1999, and only properly active since 2001. In the late 1980s, before I went to live overseas for most of the 1990s, I was a not unsuccessful Branch Secretary of a very large union branch, but it never even

occurred to me to join the Labour party, which had absolutely no relevance. In the mid-1980s I even voted for the Liberals (or it may have been the SDP) as a tactical vote against the Conservatives. A bit stupid, I admit readily.

Because I don't have the emotional and family ties that others have, if I come to believe that there is a more effective route to pursue my political objectives (which are much firmer and, I believe, much more coherent than they were in the 1980s), then I will feel no great loss at leaving the Labour party, and taking elsewhere whatever skills and energies I have left. The Labour party is a 100 years old, but it has no god given right to exist, and if it is supplanted by a more effective force able to act more effectively in the interests of the working class, then that will be a good thing.

My political beliefs have much in common with many people who have decided that the Labour party is now a lost cause, and I do not blame them for having made this choice. Yet I do believe they have made the wrong choice, and have done so out of ignorance of what the party is, of its potential, and – as significantly – because they conveniently ignore the reality that the left is, in many ways, responsible for the current position of the party.

### **The Labour party: betrayed by the left?**

Many on the left have departed from the Labour party because they feel betrayed by the national government's policies and actions while in power over the last 12 years.

I share some of that sense of betrayal, but this is tempered by the recognition the constraints under which national governments feel they must operate in a 'globalised' environment, where, as a current example, the threat [by a self-appointed credit agency](#) to reduce the overall rating from AAA unless massive public spending cuts are put in place, can seem all too real, and of much greater and immediate importance than the welfare of its own citizens during a recession.

This is not to excuse the current government, of course, because even to start to accept the all too convenient thesis that the nation state is powerless in the context of financial globalisation is to give free rein to that thesis then becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy of capitulation to neo-liberal norms.

But is important to ask exactly why has our Labour government of 12 years substantially failed to take on the countervailing pressures of globalisation and neo-liberal normalisation?

One simple answer is that those in charge are traitors to the cause, and the personal, very visceral hatred of senior Labour figures by many on the left is there for us all to see, and is understandable enough.

But I prefer a more 'structural' answer, not least because I find it hard to believe that Gordon Brown, or Tony Blair before him are 'traitors', or even bad people, rather than the victims of their own circumstances (and, as I'll explore in chapter 3, New Labour's 'alien' traditions).

My preferred answer as to why our government has not behaved as we thought it would and should, on so many issues, is that, as the Labour party, we did not tell it what to do properly; that we did not support it, or the Parliamentary Labour Party, to make the hard, institution busting decisions that it should have done in the late 1990s.

Overcome with gratitude to New Labour for seeming to make Labour electable again (and I dispute that it was New Labour that actually did this), as a party we took our eye off the ball, and assumed that our New Labour leaders would govern in the interests of those the Labour party was set up to serve. Many of us, [with notable exceptions](#), just assumed that everything would be sorted out for us, and that the job was now more or less done.

We failed to make the appropriate demands of our leaders; indeed the problem was that we accepted them wholly as leaders, no longer as delegates sent to do the party's bidding in parliament. We failed to make our demands, so of course the leaders listened and acted upon the demands of those who did make them – business lobbyists, those in favour of deregulation, those in favour of PFI, those in favour of continuing to delude ourselves about our relationship with the USA.

Thus for example, when the new Labour government commissioned the [Cruickshank report](#) into the workings of the banking industry in 1998, and the report came back recommending much tighter control on banks, who were making excessive profits yet were fundamentally guaranteed by the taxpayer, the left did not stand with the government and demand that the recommendations be implemented. Indeed, I'm not even sure the left noticed. So the banks lobbied hard, and the banks won. Whose fault is that?

The uncomfortable reality is that the left only really have itself to blame, and to repeat the mantra that 'I didn't leave the party, the party left me', [before ceremonially tearing up the party membership card](#), is an act of self-delusion.

Because, back in 1997/98, the left could have regained control of party policy; the unions would have come on side, and the membership was essentially as leftwing as it had been in the 1980s.

One of the most striking things about Paul Whiteley's and Patrick Seyd's three studies of the Labour party membership, [the first from 1983](#) and [the second from 1992](#) and the [third from 2001](#) (with Patrick Seyd), was how, despite both significant societal change, and the changes at the top of the party under Neil Kinnock and the move to the right that would culminate in New Labour and the victory of the Blairite 'modernisers,' the rank and file of the membership retained its socialist values and beliefs. The same message came out of [Hilary Wainwright's seminal 1987 Labour: A tale of Two Parties](#).

Look and ask around the grassroots membership in 2009, and the same remains true; people remain in the party because they have socialist beliefs, and young people join the party, albeit in somewhat smaller numbers, because they have been developing socialist beliefs.

The problem is that a party which remains dominated numerically by people with socialist beliefs came to be dominated and 'managed' (see chapter 3) by a small elite that thought they had the intellectual wherewithal and the political 'nouse' to take the party into a glorious post-socialism, classless future. They were able to convince many of us (myself included for a while in the late 90's) that they had indeed found some new way of doing things. They even convinced themselves. They were wrong.

At a semi-intellectual level this new way of doing things was The Third Way, and included concepts like ['the hollowed out state'](#), where in a complex world power was being devolved outwards to 'partners' and 'communities' and upwards towards Europe and big business.

Fundamentally, this was all hokum – government retained its power to act if it wanted to – but it was a useful self-fulfilling prophecy which allowed government to distance itself from what had been its core responsibilities, at international level under the cloak of ‘globalisation’, and at domestic level under the guise of ‘partnership working’.

At a media level, we were told that politics as we knew it was at end, and that the most important thing was ‘what works’. This was the cover for the development of PFI and wider privatisation, including of health care. ‘What worked’ was a balance between private and public, we were told, though we were never told where the balance of power lay between them.

And just as an earlier generation of people with essentially socialist beliefs – that’s why they were in the Labour party – was taken in by the new ‘identity politics’ of the 1980s, which seemed to provide a convenient excuse not to have to worry about the realities of class inequalities (see chapter 3), so in the late 90s and early 2000s, the left was taken in by the glamour and the glitz of a new political philosophy, brought to use to make our lives as (champagne) socialists easier and a bit more modern.

We need to be big enough to acknowledge that we taken for a ride. As I’ve said above, the left must bear its own share of the blame, and in so doing start to take the steps to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

Then we need to get over it and move on.

### **The Labour party, down but by no means out**

For there is much reason for hope.

While the deliberate ‘non-ideology’ of New Labour (or at least the vacuous essentialisms of its communitarianism) has now been shown for what it is (a handy cover for handy neo-liberalism), and while New Labour as a concept is now in its death throes, the Labour party is still here, and so is its socialist membership.

Sure, the membership is in crisis, but then the membership has been in crisis before, and come out stronger on the other side. These are the opening lines from the aforementioned 1983 study by Paul Whiteley:

‘The Labour Party is in serious trouble, and faces a series of crises greater than it has experienced since the 1930s.....Every organisation which faces multiple crises will at some point reach a stage of no return.....This has not already happened to the Labour party, and it is certainly not inevitable that it will happen.’

The crisis of membership of 2009 is only as bad it was in the late 1970s, when many members felt wholly disillusioned with the apparent inability of the Callaghan government to cope with international financial pressures without resorting to a distinctly non-socialist incomes policy.

The result was a surge of leftwing thought and practice in the 1980s, challenging the institutional conventions of the time, especially at local government level. There was a surge in membership with people drawn in from outside the party, enthusiastic about the changes within it. As I’ll explore in the chapter 4, some serious mistakes were made, and with longstanding negative consequences for the Labour left, but the energy and commitment of the 1980s Labour left needs to be recognised.

And there is no reason that the same thing cannot happen this time around. While membership numbers have certainly plummeted since the highs of the mid-1990s, when it was actually quite trendy to be a member of the Labour party or at least an overt sympathiser (remember Britpop?), they have only plummeted back to where they were.

I don't have the exact figure to hand, but I think current membership is around 200,000. The members that have been lost are, to a significant extent, made up those 'fair weather supporters' who never really contributed that much in the first place, and who have cancelled their direct debit and moved on. Certainly some members of the left have made the deliberate choice to leave the party and become active elsewhere, but then still others have decided to join.

Though clearly membership numbers are important financially to the party (which wastes quite a lot of money on publicity tosh), they are not the most important indicator of its continued relevance. More important than how many people pay their subscriptions is the continued institutional links and legitimacy that the Labour party continues to enjoy, in spite of its current unpopular profile.

Some high profile trade unions may have cut their links, but most have not. In most local parties, there is some representation from trade unions on the General Committee, though with varying levels of day-to-day engagement in party affairs which is largely dictated by the unions' different historic links in different localities, as well, for example, with whether local Labour social clubs have remained or closed.

And the party remains a genuinely national party. While the structures have fallen apart to the point that the party simply does not exist in a few places (notably in the South West), in general the party keeps on going. Sometimes it does so by hook or by crook and seemingly against all odds, but it keeps going. It keeps putting up candidates, however unlikely they are to win, and while electoral politics is not everything, the presence on the ballot paper of the name Labour remains important as a statement of the continued capacity to organise locally.

When Stuart Wilks-Heeg, [in his study of local parties in Burnley and Harrogate](#), laments the decline of the local party (link here) and the fact that in both places Labour is held together by 'less than 100' diehards, he fails to take on board that [it was ever thus](#).

Back in the mid-1970s, anti-Labour socialist Cynthia Cockburn was busy lamenting the fact that Lambeth Labour party meetings only had 20 people at it, while just a few years later pro-Labour socialist Hilary Wainwright was celebrating the fact that, on the other side of the Thames, there were meetings with up to 20 people present. 20 odd years later, neither here nor there socialist [Andrew Coulson](#) was talking about how difficult it is to get 20 people at a meeting.

It's easy to see the glass half empty if you're on a downer about the Labour party, but just as easy to see it half full. Whichever way we look at the glass though, it's not changed that much.

And out there on the big wide world, has the public's relationship with the Labour party changed that much?

It never ceases to amaze me, when I'm out canvassing, that people still refer to themselves not as in support of Labour, but as Labour: Oh, I'm Labour....The whole family's Labour...This is a Labour area... and so on'.

That's not to deny that electoral support for Labour has collapsed in areas where the local party has been ineffective at keeping it going through the hard times, but it does suggest that in many areas, like mine, there remains a deep-rooted affinity with the Labour movement, roots that have not been washed away by 15 years of New Labourism. Certainly, there is much to do to restore and revitalise that affinity, but there is also much to work with.

The reality of this affinity - of this class solidarity – was brought home to me the day before the general election, when Gordon Brown visited Skelmersdale on his campaign trail.

This is what I wrote about the moment he arrived, [in a piece](#) which drew favourable comment as a reflection of the wider post-election mood in working class area of Britain:

The Labour party lost the general election. Why then, for many of us, does it actually feel like we won?

First, I suppose, there is the relief that we didn't have to bear the sight of Cameron strolling down Downing Street, cheered by his Union Jack-waving faithful, in a 1997 retake. That we were spared that, even if he gets into No.10 by the back door, is a blessing.

Second, and more substantively, there is at least a chance that some of the Tories' [more outrageous plans](#) to batter the poor will be put on hold if they have to form a government dependent on a party which [has at least some members](#) who don't take that kindly to battering the poor like this (even if Clegg is comfortable enough with the idea of such a betrayal of his 'core' vote).

But these, important as they are, are not the main reasons why many Labour members feel we actually won on Thursday.

The reason we're actually pretty happy, and the reason that – [unlike the Tories](#) – the Labour party is not beginning its soul searching, is that Labour found its soul on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May.

Labour may have lost the election. We may even be out of government for a while, but on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> May New Labour was buried, and a newer Labour may just have been born.

For me, in the working class Liverpool overspill town that is Skelmersdale (Skem) in West Lancashire, I knew something different at around 1.30pm on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> May.

I was at the 'Connie', Skem's shopping centre, blowing up Labour balloons with helium and handing them out to kids and mums and grandmas; we'd just announced with a few flyers that Gordon Brown was on his way, and that he'd be with us in 15 minutes.

The news spread like wildfire. Within minutes there were hundreds and hundreds around the entrance and draped over the escalators trying to get the best view. When the press bus arrived, the excitement mounted.

Minutes later, as Gordon Brown emerged from his black car, there was a lull, perhaps of disbelief that this was he, and that Skem had not just been taken for a ride again. One 'wag' shouted 'Nick Clegg' and then, quite suddenly, a huge

wave of emotion – the like of which I can honestly say I have never witnessed – seem to burst over the crowd.

Some of the scene is picked up in [this short video clip from the Telegraph](#), but it doesn't really pick up the rawness of what was going on. Polly Toynbee, to her credit, [does pick up](#) that it was different from the normal reception:

'Today mothers with prams in the Skelmersdale shopping concourse crushed round Brown and several spontaneously called out: "Keep family credits! Keep him out, Gordon!" in a great scrum of unaccustomed adulation. Not party plants but a mob of ordinary people shouting out: "Come on Gordon!"'

But it was bigger than that. It wasn't just a few people shouting out in adulation. There was much more shouting, and there was much more raw emotion than Toynbee can ever get across.

This was not about Gordon Brown. This was about the working class of Skelmersdale in a mass spontaneous moment of class solidarity, and about their reidentifying with Labour, as represented on that day by Gordon Brown, as THEIR party – a party which may have let them down on many occasions, may even have left them alone for a time, but which is still THEIR party, still my party.

This is something that Giles Wilkes can't understand, though he is honest enough to [ask the question](#):

'What did Labour do to switch momentum from Lib Dems back to Labour? In [Islington South](#), [Edinburgh South](#), the [City of Durham](#), [Oxford East](#) and most tragically [Hampstead and Kilburn](#) they seemed, somehow, to tell people that the right vote is Labour. How did they win that argument? How on earth did a government this unpopular nevertheless convince voters that they were safer with Labour?

Did they use the immigration scare story? Were there loads of leaflets out there saying "Nick Clegg will flood you with immigrants"?

No, there were no such leaflets. What Giles simply can't conceive, in his liberal, intelligent individualistic/consumer choice view of the world, is that class solidarity like this happens. For liberals, the working class remains voter fodder for the experts and policy makers, not the conscious body that [EP Thompson would still recognise](#).

But up and down the country, in the areas where it wasn't expressed quite so clearly as in Skelmersdale because Gordon Brown didn't get into a scrum (there were neat orderly lines and barricades by the time he got to Blackpool later that day), the same thing was happening; the working class was reclaiming its party, and making sure 'that snot-nosed bastard' (I quote from the doorstep) didn't get in to No. 10 on Friday.

That's why so many Labour seats in working class constituencies were held, and why in many areas the Lib Dems and Tories were swept away in the accompanying local elections, while areas that don't (yet) have that sense of working class solidarity were lost to the Tories.

Of course this is only the start of the renewal of Labour, and I'll be moving on to what now has to happen in the Labour party if we are to capitalise on what has happened, building on [my earlier thesis](#) (July 2009) that the Labour party DOES remain the best place for left activists to be because that is where the working class is, and towards proposals for ways in which the left should be seeking to build class solidarity and action, not just in these more traditional working class areas but in areas where the post-industrial working class is still unsure of its objective class interest.

The opportunities for this, in the context of the coming assault on the working class by the new administration and its allies in the 'markets', will be significant, as well as challenging. This will be the early 1980s revisited, but bigger; this time the left can and must be better prepared.

This will be the task that New Labour steered us away from but to which a newer Labour might now return. It is the kind of task good leftwingers [like John McDonnell](#) have held to in a post-industrial constituency of the type we need to take in order to retake power nationally. We need more John McDonnells, and we need to build a party that will foster them.

### **Labour as least worst**

If there were a better alternative for the left, I'd choose the alternative. But there isn't.

There isn't a leftish political organisation with the same roots and links. There's no other organisation with its national coverage. There's no other organisation with anything remotely comparable a membership.

That is not to say that there are others in the left doing good stuff. The Socialist Party can teach Labour a lot about how to re-forge links with the trade union grassroots. More importantly (and more controversially, it can teach us a lot about the relative importance or otherwise of electoral politics (see chapter 3). But the Socialist Party still, nearly 20 years after its emergence from Militant (and it is a very different beast), has less than 2,000 members. I do not expect those 2,000 members to move over and join Labour right now, though drawing them in should be a medium term aim for the Labour left, but I expect even less to see large numbers of Labour members join the Socialist Party. As most Labour members know, 'you're a long time dead', and leaving the Labour party is, for all [but a select view](#) a death nor just in terms of party membership, but the longstanding friendships that often go with that membership.

While I single the Socialist Party out for begrudging praise, I am not going to engage here in a review of the capacity of all the minority leftwing parties and organisations, not least because I don't know enough about them. Indeed, the fact that I, as someone fairly interested in leftwing politics and ideas, don't know much about them, may be reflective of their lack of importance in the grand scheme of things.

Of greater importance as rival to the Labour party for the hearts and minds of the left is the Green party, if only because of its electoral success, and the fact that any further rolling out of PR may benefit it further.

But the Green party is not, of itself, a party of the left, and nor are its sympathizers. While it has members who are of the left – some of them intelligent and committed – as a whole the party does not pass the basic eligibility test for membership of the left. The Green Party's primary purpose is not to represent the interests of the

working class. Any party who has high profile spokespeople who think the recession is a good thing is, I'm afraid not to be trusted. And many Labour party members up and down the country know that, because they know the Green party members in their area [are more interested in environmental statements than they are in ordinary people's lives](#).

## **Conclusion**

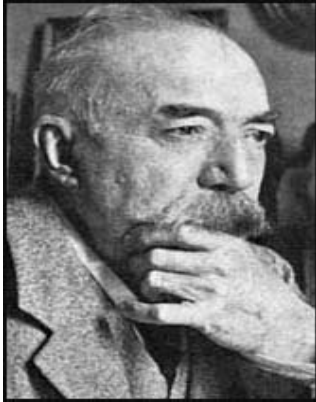
The Labour party is far from perfect, but it's the best we've got right now.

It can and will get a lot better in the next few years, and in the chapters that follow I'll be examining how it can learn from its past – both the good and the bad – to do just that, seizing the opportunity of the financial crisis to present a strategically coherent alternative, and an intellectually coherent future.

The MPs' expenses scandal of the last couple of months has changed the dynamic of the Labour party. The Parliamentary Labour Party remains an elite unto themselves, but things are changing as the grassroots finds its voice, and the leadership starts to listen.

These are exciting times to be a member of the Labour party. And as with the economy, [now is not the time to cut and run](#). Now is the time to invest in the prospect of sustainable growth.

## Chapter 2: Readying Labour



This is the second part of a six part series on the immediate and medium term future of the Labour Left in Britain.

In the first part, [published here](#), I argued that despite media portrayals, and despite the doubts of much of the Left within and outside the Labour party, the Labour party remains – at least for the present – the best place for the left to organize.

Briefly, I argued that, just as it was in the late 1970s, the Left in the Labour party might currently be relatively powerless and somewhat demoralized, but that the Labour party nevertheless retains a membership a long way to the left of the current parliamentary leadership, and that in the absence of any other coherent leftwing force in Britain, it continues to have the infrastructure best suited to the aim of a Left which can, if its gets its tactics right in the coming period, be resurgent and effective whatever the ‘colour’ of the government from 2010 onwards.

In part 3 of this series, I’ll be examining in broad terms what those ‘tactics’ might be, and in particular how they need to differ from the tactics of the Labour left in the 1980s, which won short term gains (especially at local government level) only at the expense of longer term solidarity with organized (or even disorganized labour). In so doing, I argue, it favoured temporally attractive but ultimately ineffective ‘identity politics’ over the need to reinvigorate ‘class politics’ after the failures of the Labour governments of the 1970s and the [seemingly sudden arrival of neoliberalism](#).

In chapters 4 and 5, I’ll move on to how such tactics might be implemented in the ‘real world’ of CLP and local councils respectively, assessing some of the institutional but also very personal challenges that young activists, as well as who have matured in the last one or two decades, might face.

Before that, though, I need to do some further scene setting. While the first part focused on the Labour party and where it now sits in the political environment, this part looks at that environment, and how the Labour left now needs to engage with it. In short, this part asks the question: what is the current state of capitalism in Britain, and what are the opportunities and threats for the Left?

As I set out initially [here](#), the mood amongst the ‘liberal intelligentsia’ has changed over the last few months ago. Just five short months ago, the darlings of the soft left, John Rutherford and Jon Cruddas [felt able to write](#), and expect to be taken seriously:

‘For a brief period, history is in the public realm and it is ours for the making. The Left needs to rediscover our capacity for collective change because the

opportunity will not come again for generations. The political fault lines of a new era are starting to take shape.'

The revolution was quick in the making, it seemed to them then. If anything, their call had taken on a greater urgency, and air of certainty, than [the not dissimilar one](#) four months before that (Dec 2008):

'The recession is a frightening prospect, but it is creating opportunities for social change and economic development that would have been unthinkable even six months ago. The Conservatives are floundering. The opportunities belong to the left. It is a matter of seizing these opportunities and galvanising people's creativity.'

By mid-August 2009, the Conservatives didn't seem to be foundering *that* much, and a call to revolution had turned to a [call for the government](#) to give us a Commission which would ask rich capitalists not to be quite so greedy in the future.

Similarly, the LRC's campaign '[Their Crisis, Not Ours](#)', for all its initial verve and soundness of analysis, seems a long time ago now. As for the accompanying, well-intentioned and occasionally enthusiastic, [attempts to form LeftNewMedia](#) as a means of documenting and encouraging the supposedly rising tide of anti-capitalist opinion which might lead to the storming of the [G20 conference](#), the best I think we can say is that it's still 'a work in progress' (and in my 'pending' tray).

In the Guardian too, the journos had sensed the changed mood, and decided the left was going nowhere fast. One of the articles much read and discussed at the summer evening soirees of the chattering classes was [Andy Beckett's review](#) of his Marxism '09 weekend. Here, apparently under the impression that the people turning up the event are representative of the left in Britain (rather than, say, the people out delivering Labour leaflets who never go to conference like this), Andy asked rhetorically whether '*the Left has blown its big chance*'.

Unsurprisingly, Beckett concluded that it has: '*The left used to aim to change society rather than wait for society to change in its favour. For the bankers, who seemed to be facing near-extinction less than a year ago, the prospect of much more slowly losing their dominance over western economies to ..... caring capitalists may not seem such a bad deal.*'

In the blogosphere too, there's a sense of defeatism. From [Dave Osler](#), who has perhaps let his entertaining sense of the sardonic get the better of him, and who's been talking the chances of real change down for some time now, it's no great surprise. More worrying is the normally indefatigable [Jan's sense of pessimism](#), as he looks around and see only:

'the inability of the left to unite around common issues and to understand the working class;

The inability of Labourites to understand the economic/cultural changes that have happened in the last 2 years and adapt; and

The inability of the Trade Unions to completely modify their organisations, in light of the economic recession, and become hard hitting fighting unions.'

Yet all these doomsayers, in their different ways, miss the point.

While Ian is right about the kind of thing that needs to happen, he's wrong to conclude that none of them ever will, and while Dave O is right to say that the hopes of a middle class revolt were always misplaced, he's wrong to conclude that, simply because the middle classes have decided rioting is not for them, that the left as a whole is doomed to inertia.

In actual fact, while Jon Cruddas and his colleagues' way of going about change is unlikely to achieve much (as I've set out [here](#), and will set out in more detail in part 3), his assessment of where we stand at the moment, as reflected in Andy Beckett's aforementioned report, is pretty good:

'This is the early knockings of this crisis. You've still got trillions of pounds of debt around. The assumption.....is that we tinker with this economic system, and then go back to 60 consecutive quarters of growth. But out in the country people know different. There is no economic status quo any more..... There is a space for a populist left politics – around ID cards and Trident, around taxes, tax justice – that wasn't there a year ago. This is going to take years. There was a long lag between the Wall Street Crash in '29 and the New Deal.....In the meantime, there could be a different new form of politics, much more populist, dangerous, fascistic, like the BNP.'

While his mention of 'populist left politics' is redolent of the loose, intellectually incoherent and ultimately failed politics of the New Urban Left of the 1980s to which he would have Labour return, he's right about two things.

First, it is **anger** at what's happening, and not some Fabianist vision of a more reasonable ethical socialism drawn up in Compass's seminar rooms - the early 21st century equivalent of the late 19th century [Webbs'](#) drawing room - which will drive a new leftwing movement, if that anger is not wholly hi-jacked by the far right first.

Second, the anger which can fuel proper and effective leftwing action will be a 'slow burner'.

While the initial financial crisis may have seemed like the golden opportunity for the left, and while it may seem that that opportunity has now gone, Cruddas is right to say that this is just the beginning.

Now is the time to be hopeful, not for defeatism, and now is the time to start preparing the ground within the Labour party for what comes next.

When Thatcher came to power in 1979 and set about dismantling industrial Britain, there was no immediate revolt. The anger that developed against her and her government, and culminated in the near-won strikes of the mid to late 1980s, burned slowly, and grew in proportion to the real experience of the effects of Thatcherite policy. The anger was such, and the organisation sufficiently good, that if the Labour party had then been in a position to support the workers, rather than pussyfoot around its short term electoral concerns, history would have been very different.

The same slow-burning anger is likely to develop over the next year or two, not as a result of reading about bankers' bonuses in newspapers, but as unemployment stays high, short term unemployment becomes long term poverty and deprivation from the things people got used to, and as welfare 'reform' is implemented and those on the receiving end [suffer the consequences of an increasingly alienated bureaucracy](#).

The anger will rise as public services that people have become used to are slashed by a government (of any hue) whose key performance measure is the reduction of

debt at as percentage of GDP, whatever the [arguments of sensible economists](#) about the irrelevance of this in objective terms, and as the willingness to implement savage cuts becomes [a badge of political honour](#).

Most importantly, the anger of workers – already apparent in the recent militancy at Vestas, the refineries and perhaps most especially at [Visteon in Enfield](#) – will grow as employers in both the private and public sector seek to squeeze them till the pips squeak, either because of government directive (public sector) or because they think they can (private sector).

The challenge for the Labour Left, in league with other leftist bodies, is to be ready for that growing anger, to fuel it in much the same way as the Daily Mail fuels the righteous anger of its readership, and to help channel it away from the far right, and towards better targets.

The challenge is to also to be unashamed about this, to reach back to a time before the hegemony of the Daily Mail, to the capacity of the 1960s Daily Mirror, and before that the [1890s Clarion](#), to galvanise worker and public opinion in favour of the validity of solidaristic struggle.

The Labour Left, when it starts to doubt the validity of its renewed calls for class struggle under the barrage of abuse from the dominant rightwing media, should remember that Conservatives, in less guarded moments, [feel great pride in their personal roles in the class struggle of the 1980s](#), and are happy to acknowledge its reality. We should do the same.

Finally, the challenge for the Labour Left will be to learn from others, and help build on successes to date. The East Lindsey dispute was not won, and the BNP were not excluded, for example, because of a spontaneous uprising. The dispute was won because it was carefully planned, using all available communications technologies, by people within the trade union movement and in support of it, including the Socialist Party. The Socialist Party got it right in East Lindsey, and the Labour Left should not allow old enmities to get in the way of the tactics they need to learn and relearn.

In chapter 4, I'll look at what all this means in practice for the Left within the Labour party, having looked in chapter 3 at what mistakes from the 1980s we can't afford to repeat, and how our model should be less the post-Marxist left of the 1980s, more the [distinctly Marxist left of the 1890s](#), picking our targets with care (I've suggested one [here](#) for starters), and with a view to maximum impact and maximum involvement of all types of leftwing activists from within and beyond the established political process.

Our tactics and style, I will contend, must go beyond the 'reasonableness' of Compass, or whatever latest form ex-New Labour will take, and its pointless call for [an ethical socialism based on self-restraint and a new moral purity](#).

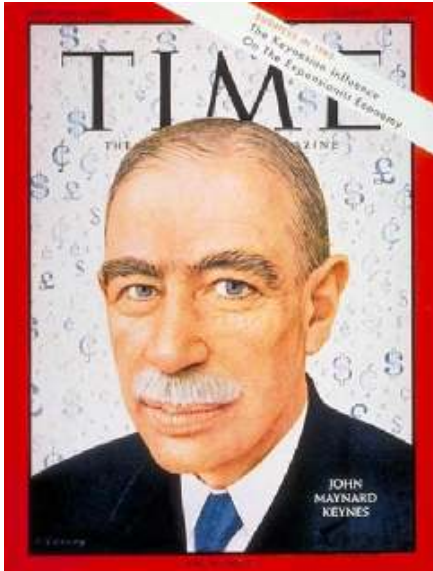
Instead, it will need to tap into the emotional resource of solidarity and tradition that made the Labour and trade union movement what it was, before it was emasculated by the 'rogue tradition' of dry communitarianism introduced by New Labour.

It needs to do so in a very 21st century way, in a way which establishes the primacy of working class struggle, whilst describing the working class in terms 21st century workers (and unemployed) people can relate to, and without setting to one side the undoubted gains made by those who have involved themselves in the struggle for the recognition and valuing of non-class identities, not least gender.

In short, the Labour left should now be setting in motion the process of establishing a new tradition within the party – the ‘fifth tradition’ I referred to all the way back [here](#).

But that’s for chapter 6, and there’s a lot of detail to get through before then. I hope you’ll be back for chapter 3, and an assessment of what we shouldn’t be doing and on what basis we shouldn’t be doing it (see [here](#) for some early, wordy tips).

## Chapter 3: 'Bevanite Ellie' and what our Keynesian past tells us about a socialist future



### 1 Introduction

This is the third part of my slow burning six part series on the future for the Left and the Labour party.

In [chapter 1](#) I set out the case for the Left to remain with the Labour party as the most effective route to socialism. In [chapter 2](#), I broadened the enquiry, and sought to answer the question: 'what is the current state of capitalism in Britain, and what are the opportunities and threats for the Left?'

In parts chapters 4 and 5, I'll be bringing the focus back onto what the Labour party and its members should do in the short to medium term to make the party into the socialist force most of us want it to be, and what challenges we will need to face. In chapter 6 I'll sum up the idea of the need to develop, consciously, a 'fifth tradition' which builds, with interrelated intellectual and practical coherence on the best of the traditions of the Labour party and the Left in Britain.

In this part, the enquiry retains its chapter 2 focus on the wider political environment, but moves attention away from the enemy of capitalism and towards our own resources. Mightily observant readers will spot that this is a change of plan, as in chapter 2 I said this part would be more specifically about the Labour left should learn from [its mistakes in the 1980s](#). This assessment will be built into chapter 4, as I felt the need to spend more time assessing the political environment in historical context before moving onto the nitty gritty of what we do next. It's my six part series and I'll do exactly what I want with it.

### 2 The present

Now, I may be a bit slower than your average blogger, so I've only just worked something out for myself, with the illuminatory assistance of [The Stilettoed Socialist](#), or [Bevanite Ellie](#) as she is known in Twitterland.

For months now, I've been wondering why the Conservatives have not made that much of the rising unemployment figures to paint a picture of the Labour government as economically incompetent.

Sure, there's been [the odd blogpost](#) about how the unemployment figure rose first to 2 and then to the 3 million mark, and there was [a poster](#) knocking around looking to reprise the 'Labour's not working' theme of the 1979 election. As and when the figure does move past 3 million there will be, I am sure, and notwithstanding the issues around the different ways unemployment is counted, that the Conservatives will make hay.

Even so, it doesn't seem to be a consistent line of attack from the Conservatives, and this has intrigued me. One obvious explanation has sprung to mind. This is that the Conservatives may be afraid that mention of the three million figure may draw negative associations with the Thatcher government's record, from some of which the current Conservative leadership has been keen to distance itself as it seeks to portray a more 'compassionate' image.

But then Ellie tweeted, and I understood. The Tories have a 'default position', she said, and it's called the 'national debt'.

A fear of association to Thatcherism may be a tactical reason for the Conservatives steering clear of the subject of unemployment, but the deeper, structural explanation is that the Conservative party, as arch political representatives of capitalism, no longer need to give it any attention at all.

The same is true of New Labour, not quite as arch but still pretty arch political representatives of capitalism. Its recession response has tended to ignore growing unemployment, apart from the odd expression of regret forced upon it when when a major employer has laid workers off, and instead to focus on the effects of the recession on its mantra-grouping, its ['hard working families'](#).

Labour's rhetorical focus is somewhat less on people who haven't got work and why they haven't, but on recession issues which are related but secondary to not having work – personal debt, housing loss, inability to get on the housing ladder etc., the expense involved in going to university in the context of uncertain economic times, the effect on pensioners. For just one example, take a look at David Miliband's constituency website and his 'Real Help for Hard Working Families in South Shields' [article](#). Here, growing unemployment is reconfigured as 'tough times', and 'people looking for jobs' are just one of the named priority groups amongst 'senior citizens', 'families' and, notably 'homeowners'.

This in itself is not especially reprehensible. The effects of unemployment are indeed felt as secondary repercussions of lack of money rather than the fact that there's no job to go to in the morning. What the rhetoric does suggest, though, is that unemployment is, of itself, no longer seen as the single biggest social issue, in the way that it was in the late 1970s, and in the way that allowed the Thatcher campaign picture of the dole queue to be quite so powerful.

While the change of rhetorical focus is subtle enough in the Labour literature, Ellie is right to point to the Conservatives' particular 'default position' of addressing national debt before all else. For the approaching election, the Conservatives will focus principally on the need to reduce debt as a percentage of GDP quickly, and blame Labour for having let it get so high, even though [rational economists](#) keep on warning that such a move may lead direct to double dip recession. For the Conservatives, a focus on national debt as electoral strategy, to the exclusion of all consideration

about the impact, whether primary or secondary, of protracted unemployment, make perfect sense.

Taken together, both the main parties' focus reflects an important, and definitive paradigm shift, away from any current possibility of a Keynesian settlement based on 'full employment'.

That is, however rational the arguments of [Krugman et al.](#) that a refreshed Keynesian approach to managing the world economy will keep stand us all in good stead, it just ain't going to happen.

Now, I know that an article in which the main thesis is that Keynesianism is dead as an ideology is likely to be greeted with hoots of derision from both left and right, and plenty of 'where have you been for the last 30 years?', but hear me out there, please.

What I am saying is not simply that we are unlikely to return to Keynesian policies soon because rightwing governments and their economic policies hold sway, and because the sensible arguments of Paul Krugman and his followers currently fall on deaf ears.

What I am saying, rather, is that the key problem addressed by Keynesianism – unemployment – is no longer conceived as a problem for the continuation of capitalisms; and if the key problem simply does not 'exist', then the policies put forward by Keynes to solve that problem – monetary adjustment to manage demand and generate 'full employment' – are simply no longer relevant to capitalism.

### **3 The past**

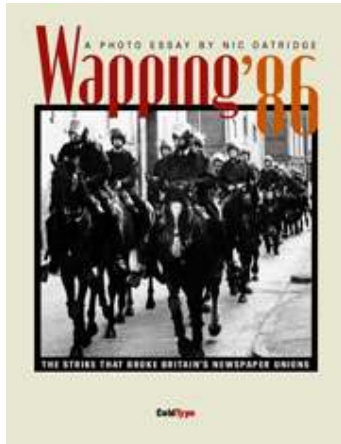
In order to understand properly the distinction between these two position – between Keynesian policies being out of favour and Keynesian policy being irrelevant to the sustaining of capital accumulation, we need to look less at Keynesian policies themselves itself, and more at the environment in which they were developed in the 1920s and 1930s.

This is what Massimo De Angelis has to say in ['Keynesianism, Social Conflict and Political Economy'](#):

'Keynesianism is defined in terms of an expansionary strategy of growth. Embedded within a social and institutional framework that enables the different interests in society to remain on a dynamic balance within a regime of capitalist accumulation.....Keynesianism was never just an economic theory, it was also a form of social practice – it needed institutions that allowed the theory to work, and it implied a vision of power relations amongst classes in society.'

In other words, far for being a pro-active economic strategy to bring sustained growth and harmony, Keynesianism was a reaction to the social upheaval of the 30 years leading up to the publication of [The General Theory](#) in 1936. As Antoni Negri [put it](#) in 1968:

'The October Revolution had once and for all introduced a political quality of subversion into the material needs and struggles of the working class, a specter that could not be exorcised.....Once the antagonism was recognised, the problem was to make it function in such a way as to prevent one pole of the antagonism breaking free into independent destructive action.'



Of course, in Britain it wasn't simply the October Revolution that gave capitalism enough of the collywobbles to allow Keynesian thinking to emerge into the light of day; in the early 1930s not only will European revolutionary activity have been well in mind, but the effective actions of the [Social Democratic Federation](#) in the 1890s would still have been well in memory, just as the violence during the miners' strikes and at Wapping are etched on the minds, and not a few skulls, of my generation.

But the key point is clear, the strategy of full employment creation through demand push expansion came about because capitalism and capitalists were scared of what might happen if they didn't pacify the working class.

To say so is not to do down the brilliance of the technical innovation brought forward by Keynes and his immediate predecessors (Hobson included, whose overinvestment theory may be due a come back at some point). It is simply to set that brilliant innovation in its ['Kuhnian'](#) context.

In essence then, capitalists in the 1930s and then postwar bought into an arrangement that let them sleep peacefully in their beds at night; as Michal Kalecki put it at the time ([Political Aspects of Full Employment](#), 1943): 'Discipline in the factory and political stability are more appreciated than profits by business leaders', even though 'Their class instinct tells them that lasting full employment is unsound from their point of view, and that unemployment in the 'normal' capitalist system.

The post-war Keynesian consensus was only ever a temporary stand off, and by the late 1970s capitalism had found a way to accumulate capital beyond its constraints. While the transition towards neoliberalism in the 1970s is often pinned on economic stagnation in the UK and elsewhere, the reality is that it had been planned this way for some time. [The Mont Pelerin Society](#), committed to a return to 'pure' capitalism was formed in 1947, even as Keynesian tactics were being consciously adopted, and received massive corporate backing from an early stage.

Neoliberalism was not brought about by the failure of Keynesianism so much as by the tactical use of a combination of economic growth slowdown and the opportunities afforded by 1960s and 1970s social liberalism so easily co-opted to 'freemarketism' especially in the period following the Hungarian clampdown and increased awareness of the realities of Stalinism (see David Harvey's [Brief History of Neoliberalism](#) for a good brief review of this period).

More importantly, the opportunity to start a second wave of exploitation of the developing world through appropriation of cheap labour in addition to primary resources allowed capitalism in the industrialised world allowed it to set to one side the necessity of retaining passable industrial relations.

But perhaps most significantly, the fear had gone. By the 1980s, Thatcher felt she could use brutal military-style tactics to break strikes with impunity, and she was right. As in the 1930s, the Labour party stood to one side while the paradigm was shifted, and soon enough the Keynesian consensus, at the heart of which is the right to employment and associated social benefits was gone.

#### 4 The future, looking back

Why this brief review of the life and death of Keynesianism?

Well, as set out above, my main contention is that Keynesian policies as we knew them will not be re-introduced just because Keynesian economists have very persuasive arguments.

Already, as the financial gives way to recessionary pain for people who did not cause the crisis and renewed bonuses for those who did, Keynesian arguments are being set to one side, and the self-fulfilling prophecy that economies will become unsustainable unless the [credit rating agencies' demands](#) for fiscal conservatism are heeded and public spending appropriately slashed.

Already, despite perfectly sensible arguments from people like Chris Dillow that the notion of the '[Evil Poor](#)' is simply illogical, people [on the far right of the Labour party](#) are happy to peddle the notion that it is the poor who are the cause of social breakdown and that a lack of employment that actually produces a living wage has nothing to do with it. For those rightwing demagogues, the rights of labour, including the reserve army of labour, are a thing of the distant past.

On the soft left of the Labour party, the approach is to argue for some kind of ethical socialism, in the basis that if we argue hard enough and long enough, capitalism will be seduced and won over. The argument draws on the history of the labour movement, and people who would like to see an ethical socialism of the type proposed are duly seduced by that selective history, in which Keir Hardie is a dreamer in the Welsh valleys rather than a Scottish miner who endured huge levels of hardship to combat Victorian capitalism.

In my view, Jon Cruddas' *New Statesman* article (I can't bring myself to read his [latest speech](#) just yet) is [an insult to the memory of Keir Hardie](#). The focus is solely on his later life, and how he connects to the thinking of Tawney and Cole *et al.* However, as even Francis Williams (1950) set out in his [utterly Fabian-biased but passionate review](#) of the first 50 years of the party, the latter part of Hardie's life – essentially his Welsh part – was the life of a man exhausted by the struggle of one who worked 14 hours a day from the age of 8, except when he kept from earning any money at all, and who helped forge the Labour party not as some kind of philosophical endeavour, but because he *hated* the injustices of capitalism.

And in my view, Jon Cruddas and his colleagues appeal for a new kind of socialism ignores the reality of socialist history in Britain – that the advance of Fabian thought was made possible by the strikes organised by the Social Democratic Federation, and that Keynesianism and the post-war temporary class consensus was made possible by the pre-war lack of it.

What I should stress here is that I do not seek to be 'anti-intellectual'. I pride myself on the fact that I learned to read proper books, and unlike [Dave Osler](#) I have no problem with Jon Cruddas reading and quoting from as many thinkers as he feels like. My problem with Jon is simply that he's read all the right books but come to the wrong conclusions, and that he's judged the successes of Labour history to be a

result of those who wrote about it best, rather than those who struggled for it (though of course there can and should be an overlap here).

Nor do I wish to suggest that Jon has no part in the Left's future, as long as he is able to take on board what he's got wrong to date; he is clever, and he is eloquent, and he can be a 21st century version of the 19th century *Clarion* editor, Robert Blatchford; poetry and passion have always played a great part in the Labour movement, and a capacity to engage and motivate with words is as necessary as it ever was. Jon could be just the man if he knuckles down.

## **5 The future, looking forward**

The future of socialism does not lie in [the building of electoral coalitions](#), however well it's done. On which argument see these debates between Compass members Tom Miller and [Sunny Hundal](#), and [Dave](#). The Labour party's tried that. We got New Labour (see part 4 for more detail).

The future of socialism lies in *re-establishing* a working class identity, an identity which carries [primacy over](#) but [absolute respect for](#) the other identities which have been forged through admirable struggle over the last 30 years.

That identity can only be forged through its differentiation from, [and essential antagonism to](#), the interests of the other primary identity – that of the ruling class – and our struggle with it for power. This is a difficult task, certainly, because the working class is not as socially homogenous as it was; the notion that it is having your labour exploited than what kind of car you get to drive or whether you live in a council flat or not, or even whether you've got work or never had that opportunity.

You don't overthrow 40 odd years of the cultural hegemony at one go, and a tactical approach which fights and celebrates small victories will be needed, but winning and building on small victories will be more effective in the long run than appealing to the better nature of capitalism. Capitalism is a force and a system, and, like the weather system, it can't be appealed to.

In chapter 4, I'll look at exactly what those small victories might be, and how the Labour party can go about winning them.

## **6 The future, looking forward sustainably**

Working towards a position where capitalism has to set up another '[spatio-temporal fix](#)' to accommodate labour within the ongoing system of capital accumulation may lead to some form of post-Keynesian settlement. The problem is that the Keynesian settlement was based on an economic strategy of expansion fuelled by increased demand.

The 21st century settlement will need to do it different, because continued expansion could destroy the world, which is just about the only thing which overrides the primacy of the interest of the working class. Any settlement that occurs will need to reflect worker demands for the protection and replenishment of natural resources by capital, and towards that end workers do need to work with the green movement, but in a reversal of roles to those held at the moment, where the green movement believes it has the key role, and workers are expected to follow – normally by submitting themselves to some form of ethical plan for the greater good in a way which allows capital to continue to get away with the real abuse of natural resources. I can't put it better than Patrick Rolfe did in [a recent letter](#) *The Guardian* over the

Vestas sit-in, taking to task the 'blindspot' of famous holier-than-thou green activists [George Monbiot](#) and Paul Kingsnorth:



'The ongoing protests at the Vestas wind turbine factories demonstrate one thing – the fight for sustainability can, and must, be a fight pursued by workers and ordinary people against those who seek profit over sustainability. In short, the struggle must be a class struggle. Kingsnorth points out that 'our' civilisation is based on the exploitation of natural resources. However, 'our' civilisation is also based on the exploitation of people, and unless we fight both of these as one battle, a grim future surely beckons.'

## 7 The future, concluded

And so, thanks to Bevanite Ellie and her intuitive twittering, there you more or less have it.

Keynes didn't bring about Keynesianism. Workers' struggle did. Keynes did the paperwork, and did it very well indeed

Keynesianism is often regarded as something like the 'middle way', although Keynes himself accepted that his work was in defence of capitalism in its hour of need rather than in favour of any socialist line of thought. He never had much to say about wages, for example. As Paul Krugman says in his [recent well-worth reading essay](#):

'Keynes did not, despite what you may have heard, want the government to run the economy. He described his analysis in his 1936 masterwork, 'The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money,' as 'moderately conservative in its implications.' He wanted to fix capitalism, not replace it.'

Last time, the force of the working class was with him in his conservative tinkering with the system, and the repair job lasted 30 odd years.

This time, to get to a new environmentally sustainable post-Keynesian settlement will require the same.

As the old saying goes, 'you don't have to be a Marxist to believe in social justice'. And, likewise, you don't have to want a full-blown revolutionary to understand that you need to engage in revolutionary struggle to get towards some form of social justice, however, 'reformist' and placatory to the ruling class.

At heart, and unlike my Blograde Dave, I'm not sure I do want a full-blown revolution, unless it comes [with cocoa and tasteful soft furnishings](#). But I do know that even he's going further than me down that road, it makes sense to head his way for a while, till (a little bit like Hardie, if I can make so bold with the comparison) I'm too knackered to do anything but sit in the valleys and philosophize.

## Chapter 5: A five point plan for the organisation of the Labour left



### Introduction

This is the first section of the fourth part of six parts in an occasional series on the future of the left and the Labour party, The [Fifth Tradition](#), combining as it does important elements of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd traditions that have marked out the history Labour party, but not the 4th, which is a bad one and should be rejected.

This first section of part 4 sets out step 1 in a five part action plan, of which steps 2 to 5 will follow over the next four evenings.

Got that? Oh never mind. Just read on, will you?

In this version of part 4 (steps 1-5), which is likely to be heavily adapted when I revise it in light of the multi-million pound book deal I'm almost certainly working towards with this series, I am writing with a mind to the [Labour Representation Committee \(LRC\) AGM](#) to be held on 14 November 2009. I won't be there, but this is what I've got to say to the people who will be, as well as to anyone else on the left who's reading it.

In [chapter 1](#) of the series I set out the case for the Left to remain with the Labour party as the most effective route to socialism.

The key challenge I was set in the comments on that post was to provide an evidence base for my assertion that the Labour party continues, on balance, to have the most suitable infrastructure AND membership for a resurgence in appropriate leftwing activity. It is an issue that Dave Semple brings up, and it is something that Salman, for example, explicitly denies [here](#).

I accept and agree that more work needs doing on this area, but maintain that the available evidence does suggest that, in most areas of the country at least, the Labour party continues to be the most effective vehicle for the Left at local level. The key weakness in Salman's argument that the Labour party has lost its validity as a force for the left is that his referent is the the national leadership; he provides no evidence that the wider membership has lost that validity, and indeed my main claim is that the wider membership, while currently powerless to effect a move towards the left (for reasons I will explore in Chapter 3, with recommendations for action), does wish to do so.

In [chapter 2](#), I *broadened* the enquiry, and sought to answer the question: ‘what is the current state of capitalism in Britain, and what are the opportunities and threats for the Left?’

In [chapter 3](#), I sought to *deepen* that enquiry, looking particularly at how working class struggle brought about the Keynesian post-war fix (covered again in briefer, more polemic form [here](#)), and then to suggest that ‘the future of socialism lies in *re-establishing* a working class identity, an identity which carries [primacy over](#) but [absolute respect for](#) the other identities which have been forged through admirable struggle over the last 30 years.’

In this chapter 4, I’ll be seeking to build on the [five point plan recently set out by Owen Jones](#) (of the LRC in his article over at Socialist Unity , and recently [assessed by Dave here at TCF](#)).

Owen’s article was a useful contribution, in that it highlighted the importance of re-engagement with the working class, and the primacy of working class interest in anything we do. In the face of liberal-left alternatives (like this, for example) which seek to drain what resources the left has and use them to campaign for pleasant-sounding but materially irrelevant ‘freedom’ and ‘reforms’, keeping on highlighting, to anyone who’ll listen, what the left is actually for, is vital

Where the article falls short though is that it drifts towards being a shopping list of proper leftwing policies, somewhat in the style of Compass shopping lists, without sufficient focus on how the Left might go about acquiring the power its needs within in the Labour party and the labour movement more generally, so that it is in a position to start to enact leftwing policy.

Here, therefore, I present a five point action plan complementary to Owen’s, in which the focus fair and square on wresting control of power mechanism. As Dave [is keen to remind us](#), it’s about about ‘organisation, organisation, organisation’ comrades, and it’s on how and what we might organise that I now focus.

### **Step 1 of 5: Reclaiming the local party infrastructure**

It’s not trendy. It’s not very exciting. But this is where it has to start. The exciting bits comes at step 3, but you’re not allowed to go there till you’ve got through step 1 and step 2. That’s the point. The exciting stuff won’t happen without the dull stuff.

I’ve set out at some length [previously](#) some of the ideological confusion and consequent organisational deficiencies of the left, including the Labour left, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the last time it had may of the kind of opportunities and concomitant threats it now faces. I’ll come back to some of those organisational deficiencies below (step 2), and suggest what we need to do better this time around.

However, we should also recognise what the Left did well back then. In many urban centres what became known as the [New Urban Left](#), there were quiet, and sometimes not so quiet, revolutions in Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), as people (men, mostly) who had headed up party structures for years suddenly found them under challenge, and the notion that local parties were ‘full’ – you’d think it was apocryphal but it’s not – were challenged by a new breed of activists.

Often unlinked to unions and their conservative (small ‘c’; but sometimes big L for liberal), these new activists often had funny ways and ideas, including feminism, a desire to challenge the National Front, a focus on housing need, and all sorts of stuff which had had not much place in the Labour party of the 1970s.

There are plenty of books about this phase, because for plenty of young thinkers and radicals it was the very best time in their lives, when theory met practice, and they won. That's something to boast about. [Here's](#) one, [here's](#) one, [here's](#) another. Take your pick. They're all pretty good, contemporaneous or near contemporaneous studies from activist-academics.

What they achieved when they'd grasp the levers of local Labour party has been, in retrospect, disappointing and even inimical to the material progress of the working class; I'll come to that below (step 2). Yet what we can't deny, and what we should learn from is their **organisational success** in wresting power from the Labour right – in many areas of the country – and, almost in passing, getting a then leftwing Tony Benn to the Deputy Leadership of the Labour party – (we'll set to one side [Tony's more recent indiscretions](#) out of respect for his now advanced years).

Their organisational strategy was not rocket science. It simply involved a commitment to doing the small things properly, and keeping on doing them. It involved a recognition that, just as is the case today, years of a Labour government which had not lived up to working class expectations, party structures had simply withered away, and could be taken over by anyone committed to doing so, and a secondhand typewriter.

Just for example, [Hilary Wainwright \(1987\)](#) gives us this story about two young activists, Anita Pollock and Phil Bradbury in Newnham, a borough of London:

'There we were with three councillors for the area who didn't live in the ward, Claude and a sweet old woman who'd run the ward in the past. We were elected chair and secretary.'

Anita got hold of the address list of about 50 members and went to visit them, only to find that most of them were dead. She and Phil Bradbury then went round from door to door recruiting.'

If this sounds a familiar scenario, that's because it is a familiar scenario up and down the country. What Phil and Anita did thirty years ago – the first stage in the development of a leftwing local party controlled by leftwingers – is perfectly replicable now.

Of course the next bits are harder, and in some places where the right is strong and well organised, there will be real struggles even at this level, and a need to recruit lefties into the party as an initial step, drawing them in with some of the promise and ideas that I'll set out in steps 3 to 5.

Luke Akehurst, an excellent party organiser and staunch defender of the Labour right, [has made no bones](#) about his commitment to keeping the hands of the left of the levers of any power in Hackney, for example, both because he realises how easy it could be for him to lose control if he doesn't watch out, and because he understands the importance of having say and even control over whatever party machinery (including the reisograph if there is one), and the party funds. Luke says:

The Bennite left and its Trotskyist allies have not gone away. I see the evidence of that every time I go to my local Labour GC meeting. Their cadres are getting older but a Labour defeat in the General Election will allow them to recruit new activists and reactivate old ones around a myth of leadership betrayal.

The left has to be as clued up as Luke, and has to have the same courage of convictions that Luke displays. The left also, perversely perhaps, needs to have the

same confidence that Luke has about its potential for a resurgence within the party, though of course it should seek this resurgence whether Labour lose the general election or not, having campaigned hard for a Labour victory (see also step 5).

The next local bits – taking over the CLP and starting to get committed lefties in both as local councillors (though see below on the relative importance of this) will also require the kind of caucus discipline and commitment to the dull but essential first step cause.

My own research interviews with Manchester activists who worked for a Labour left takeover of the party in the early 1980s made clear to me how solid organization and commitment were as important as any ideological drive. Activists reported meeting three or four evenings a week in different fora both to argue their case and ensure votes went their way, and to ensure that comrades knew exactly what was required when the crunch times came. It might not have been pretty, but it worked.

Can such local organization work again in enough places to build up a critical mass of Labour left power bases? Yes, it can, but we also need to be aware of the countervailing pressures that left activists will face, and provide support – whether it be through the LRC mechanisms or more informally.

The biggest pressure, of course, is to conform to the New Labour ideal of what it is to be a Labour activist; that is, the pressure is to accept that an activists first role is to gather votes for the party. I will pick this up at step 4 'The re-conceptualisation of campaigning', because it is so important as a specific (peer) pressure; it is probably the most controversial recommendation for Labour left action that I will make.

But there are more general pressures that didn't exist in the later 1970s/early 1980s, and which might easily deflect a working class-focused left movement within Labour from its key purpose. Perhaps the most important of these, linked to the growth of internet communications, is the 'liberal left' issue-based (as opposed to class-based) campaigning that has been the subject of much debate [on this blog](#) and [several others](#) over the last few days.

In what is developing into a catch phrase, the key issue is one of opportunity cost. Quite simply, a Labour left which is seeking to renew its sense of purpose and organization, does not also have the resources to devote to what are essentially side issues like electoral reform.

The challenge is to persuade lefties who might be tempted towards such campaigns – which can look attractive, even politically 'sexy' and offer the prospect of quick wins – that prospects for real success lie with the potential for a working class-oriented Labour party, first at local level, and then expanding.

Yes, there must be real prospects for success, and a clear route to get there, and I'll come to that in step 3, but nor should activists be under any illusion that step 3 can happen without steps 1 and 2. The world will not be changed materially for the working class because of an internet competition; it may change if activists can get real.

That's step 1. Here's the summary for the rest of this action plan:

#### Step 2: Staying focused

How the Labour left must avoid the pitfalls of the Labour left of the 1980s, and eschew the easy feelgood victories in favour of the real deal

### Step 3: Hitting New Labour's power base where it hurts

How the only way the Labour left can seize back power from the New Labour institution is to develop a radical new contract with the unions which bypasses the traditional entente between union and party leadership through a disaffiliation/reaffiliation process.

### Step 4: The reconceptualisation of campaigning

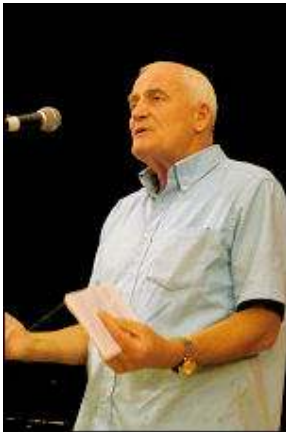
How the Labour left must tear up the part of the Labour party rule book which makes members leadership campaigning fodder, and give a whole new meaning to what it is to campaign for Labour.

### Step 5: Working with the best of the rest of the left

How the Labour left needs to tear up the rule book about working with other left parties, to get humble about what the Labour party has been and is, and earn the trust and comradeship of socialists who have learnt to hate Labour. If this means Labour thrives and subsumes other parties in time, so be it. If it means Labour is subsumed by other parties in time, so be it.

What matters is the outcome for the working class, not the name of the organisation.

### **Step 2 of 5: Staying focused**



As I explored in [step 1](#) of this five point organisational action plan for the Labour left, the 'New (Urban) Left' of the early 1980s displayed admirable levels of commitment and organisation to gain control of a significant number of Constituency Labour Parties and of council groups.

A while ago, when Ken Livingstone was beaten by Johnson in the London mayoral elections, I stopped what I was doing to ['pay homage to Ken and his ilk'](#), and I meant it. There is a lot the Labour left of today can learn from the Labour left that struggled in the face first of a Labour government that had lost direction, and then in opposition to a Tory government which was much worse than anything Labour could have been (sound familiar?).

But while we should celebrate and model ourselves on the successes of the 1980s Labour left, we should also take note of the failures. These are failures which continue to have repercussions for the Labour left of today.

In five point action plan [article](#) in Socialist Unity, Owen sets out this key failure, and its legacy, very well:

‘The left has ceased trying to appeal to the working class as a whole. All too often we focus almost exclusively on small minorities instead. Part of this is the legacy of the New Left of the 1960s, a movement which essentially felt that the working class had lost its revolutionary potential. They replaced it with oppressed minority groups like ethnic minorities, gays, or even students.’

I have covered the intellectual history of this drift away from the working class fully [elsewhere](#), and this need not detain us long, except to say that Owen is right (and this reflects David Harvey’s excellent analysis) to say that some of the responsibility for this drift can be attributed to the post-Marxist developments of the 1960’s, which only really took hold in Britain in the 1970s with the arrival/translations of intellectuals [like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau](#).

Equally, though, it is important to recognize that part of the reason for the disengagement of Labour parties and the traditional working class was the reluctance conservative trade union movement of the 1970s to engage with issues beyond those of its white own segmented labour forces. Like the New Left, they forgot about the primacy of the ‘working class as a whole’.

More important for our purposes than the particular circumstances in which this New Left disengagement from the working class took place, though, is **how it was expressed in terms of local Labour parties’ organization and culture**.

Of course, what Labour parties did and how they did it was principally determined by one thing – the arrival of a Conservative government intent on breaking the so-called post war consensus.

In many ways, that made life very easy for local Labour parties – too easy, indeed. Local successes in the early 1980s came thick and fast as Conservatives were swept from power in some councils, and the Labour left took over in others.

The Labour left adopted a new set of heroes, whether they were Ken Livingstone in the South, Tony Mulhearn and Graham Stringer in the North West, or David Blunkett in Yorkshire. Life seemed good, and the Left was on the march. Most of all, it seemed, the New Left had adopted a new openness to minority rights and causes, to the development of rainbow coalitions, that anything seemed possible.

Except that it wasn’t.

Hindsight is an easy thing, but looking back the theme that runs through all the New Left successes of the early and mid 1980s is strikingly obvious; **they were all to do with elected local government, and little to do with the ‘real world’ outside the public sector**.

In the places where the new breed of middle class Labour activist and councillor dominated, like Manchester and London, there was an understandable but misguided sense that taking control of a local authority was the biggest kicking you could give to Thatcher. Certainly it made for good press.

But in the longer term, it meant that links with the trade union movement, the lifeblood of the Labour party in terms of membership and finance, atrophied, as working class people started to feel ill at ease in the new type of party meeting, and agendas came to be dominated not directly by the relationship between capital and

labour (and the political education surrounding that), but by public services, the workings of the local authority, and increasingly by the yearly campaigning associated with now all-important local elections.

Even in Liverpool, where the rise of the Labour left was a more genuinely working class affair, an unhealthy and ultimately fatal (for the Labour left) distance developed between the Labour party and the unions, as the Labour party homed in on public housing (with some justification given the appalling housing stock of the late 1970s) and the upkeep of public services.

At the weekend at Socialism 2009, Tony Mulhearn of Militant fame set out what I suggest might be a slightly rose-tinted version of what took place. [According to Dave](#), who heard him speak:

‘Mulhearn outlined how the National Front wouldn’t show its face in Liverpool during the 1980s, such was the unity of the labour movement and the working class. The response of the Labour bureaucracy and the Trades Union bureaucracy was to try and crush militancy. The local Labour Party was suspended. Men like Ron Todd and Dave Basnett were ordered to ‘investigate’ the local labour organisations, to detach the district trades council from Labour, even though the members of their unions were receiving the best wages from the Militant/Labour local authority.’

Note his emphasis on the importance of public sector wages. It’s interesting to compare this with the more contemporaneous review set out in Mulhearn’s and Peter Taafe’s 1988 book *Liverpool: A city that dared to fight*:

‘At one stage, opposition to the measures of Tory and right-wing Labour governments gathered around the Trades Council and Labour Party, then a joint body. At another stage, it was the Trades Council which provided the focal point of opposition.’

In the 1980s, the District Labour Party (DLP) became the movement’s main forum of debate and the focus of working-class struggle. The Trades Council became an inconsequential body, with very little participation in its deliberations by the major trade unions. It concentrated on secondary issues, which were of vital concern to the squabbling sectarian grouplets which dominated its proceedings but which left the working class cold. This body was elbowed aside by the DLP, which now provided the leadership for all the main working class struggles in the area. No strike, no picket line, no movement of a working class community, no occupation, took place in the area without the conscious intervention of the DLP and the leading figures such as Tony Mulhearn, Derek Hatton and Eddie Loyden.’

This is not an attempt to sully the reputation of Tony Mulhearn and other brave Militant members who fought with him; there are as many interpretations of the Militant era in Liverpool as I’ve had hot dinners, and I do not claim to know them all. I may not agree with all their tactics, but I do know they were brave, committed socialists.

What is striking, however, is the apparent dislocation between the rhetoric of working class unity and the increasing focus on the local authority as the main site of struggle, and local councillors (three of them named) as the key leaders. Interestingly, despite the mention of strikes and pickets, there is nothing in Taafe’s and Mulhearn’s book to suggest that the DLP was involved with industrial disputes beyond the public sector which operated under its political control, and even these

strikers were somewhat tepid (the all-out strike proposal of September 1985 was rejected by council staff in favour of a one-day stoppage).

Certainly, when the day came and Militant members were expelled, there was nowhere, in terms of an organisation outside the grip of the Labour party HQ bureaucracy, to fall back on for support, and in time the whole labour movement in Liverpool was weakened to the extent that there has been nigh on 20 years of Libdem control of the council.

What is also striking though, and encouraging, that in Mulhearn's apparent revisionism 20 years on, he refocuses on the need for unity with working class/trade union organisations; even if his comrades got their tactics wrong then (and of course he would dispute that and blame a right-wing union bureaucracy for its treachery), he recognises the importance today.

What does this brief exploration of the Labour left tell us about how we should organise this time around. I think it tells us three main things.

First, and most obviously, we should cast off any lingering thoughts – if we have them – that a Tory government in 2010 would not be such a bad thing, because it will allow the left to get its act together in opposition locally. Quite aside from the fact a Tory government will actively bring material harm to the working class, what I have sought to set out above is that, while short-term local success may come our way, it will be the type of success most likely to harm our wider prospects; much better to re-engage with the working class under a government which might be supportive of material change in favour of the working class, if the working class can force it to do so (see section 3).

Second, and related, local government, and electoral success, is a panacea, but it is not the real deal. While public services are important enough, they are simply not as important as the relationship between capital and labour (of course there is an overlap when it comes to public sector employment, and that should not be underestimated). Further, we are kidding ourselves if we think democratic control over local authorities is the most important thing to concern ourselves with, given that [just 5% of public expenditure is actually under local authority control](#) anyway.

Put simply, there are often more important things to do for CLPs to do than to spend most of their time in the murky world of local election campaigning. If members are interested in public services, it's the health services and central government welfare services, alongside the quangos like the LSC and the RDAs where the real action is, and it's there where our action should be too.

But alongside this is the real priority of starting to draw members in from the trade unions, and to encourage unionization/workplace in places where there isn't any, whether through direct or indirect financial support and through the renewal of proper functional and delegate links to CLPs (many of which have simply withered over time, including the re-establishment of 'Trades Councils' (under whatever name) on an equal footing with CLPs.

This is no easy task, but I'll come (in step 3) to the main incentive that the Labour left needs to develop to make it happen – the promise of much greater real say over the party's affairs through a process of disaffiliation of unions at national level and re-affiliation at local level as a way of reversing the financial flows within the Labour party itself.

In addition to re-engagement with unionism, there is the work to be done in supporting and developing community-based action, particularly around job creation, including through social enterprise (see tomorrow also).

In terms purely of local party organisation, this is what CLP and branch agendas need to be about, and this is what our leaflets should become – not councillor/local government publicity, but real news about the real world (see also section 4 on the reconceptualization of campaigning).

Third, and related to the first two, **councillors need to know their place.**

Labour councillors from the time of Herbert Morrison have tended to rule the local party roost, and have come to expect that all party business revolves around them and the MP (if there is one). But as I've set out above, in the context of their limited material importance to the working class, the resources devoted to and expected by councillors and wannabee councillors is not justified (and people not involved in local government recognise this readily enough).

Councillors need to get on with doing their job, reporting back as and when required to their branches/CLP, and (increasingly) seeking to do what is set out from them by the CLP membership. They should be part of the whole party operation, and be recognised as only a part.

This is not an easy transition to make (though easier than the transition MPs will need to make, and which I'll cover in section 3) but it is an important aspect of the overall transition of local Labour parties from their overwhelming focus on the electoral cycle towards real politics.

These three organisational shifts taken together, you start to get a different local Labour party set up – one not closed in on itself, and one which focus on the priorities of the working class, not the priorities of a local political class and their public servants.

Coming up in the next steps this five point action plan.....

### Step 3: Hitting New Labour's power base where it hurts

How the only way the Labour left can seize back power from the New Labour institution is to develop a radical new contract with the unions which bypasses the traditional entente between union and party leadership through a disaffiliation/reaffiliation process.

### Step 4: The reconceptualization of campaigning

How the Labour left must tear up the part of the Labour party rule book which makes members leadership campaigning fodder, and give a whole new meaning to what it is to campaign for Labour.

### Step 5: Working with the best of the rest of the left

How the Labour left needs to tear up the rule book about working with other left parties, to get humble about what the Labour party has been and is, and earn the trust and comradeship of socialists who have learnt to hate Labour. If this means Labour thrives and subsumes other parties in time, so be it. If it means Labour is subsumed by other parties in time, so be it.

### Step 3 of 5: Hitting New Labour's power base where it hurts



We move to step 3 of the five point organisational action plan for the Labour left.

[Step 1](#) was all about taking over local party infrastructures and how manageable that is. [Step 2](#) was all about avoid the pitfalls that the Labour left fell into in the 1980s, keeping focused on engagement with the working class and using that to draw in a new and revitalised membership.

But there's an elephant in the room, and it's time to confront it.

As my blogging colleague Dave Semple neatly pointed out here in a separate but [complementary post](#) (see comment no.2), the name of the Labour party is 'besmirched'.

There's no point in seeking to deny that for many young people with leftwing inclinations, in particular, the idea that the Labour party offers a viable way forward is simply ridiculous.

By way of recent example, while Salman, – a committed young activist, I'm sure – is [good enough to pat me, an my 'old Labourite' head](#) and say he admires what I'm trying to do, he's not prepared to engage in any serious discussion/analysis about the difference between the national leadership and the Labour grassroots.

Similarly, when I was giving a talk about local politics a few years ago at the local university, not long after the initial Iraq war, a first year student – so I guess about 18 Or 19 years old – asked me quite simply 'How can you live with yourself?' with reference to my party membership.

The message is that, as Labour members, we're all implicated together. I could talk till I'm blue in the face about the opportunities the left now has to take over a valid (and reasonably financed) infrastructure; my impeccable logic (though not fully evidenced-based yet) will not be believed because I am seen as an accessory both to murder overseas and the ransacking of civil liberties in the UK.

This is not something to be bitter about, because such a reaction is what drives people even further from the Labour party, but it is something to acknowledge openly.

Then, just for good measure in the challenge the Labour left faces, there's the other elephant in the room.

This is again the elephantinely obvious point that just gaining control of the local infrastructure isn't the big prize that people on the left really want; they want more say not just on local issues, but on how the national Labour party conducts its affairs, and the policies this and future Labour governments will implement.

That's not rocket science to work out, because it's what people who've stayed in the party want as well.

Talk to most Labour party activists for any length of time at all and before very long you'll get to the key reason why many people have 'had it up to here' with the party.

If you explore a bit further, it usually gets around to the decision, taken by the Labour party conference in 1997, to adopt [Partnership in Power](#) (PiP), and thereby to abandon once and for all any pretension that ordinary members and branches might have any real influence over national party and thereby government policy (see also [here](#) and [here](#) for reviews).

Further, it comes to round to the total lack of respect that the Parliamentary Labour Party has for anything 'beneath' it, to the extent that they will now quite happily ignore party rule that the PLP accepted in 1997. This is [set out usefully by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy \(and Peter Hain\)](#) in the following terms at the time of the 2005 review of the PiP process:

The review is, in large part, a recognition that PiP is facing a crisis of credibility. In his latest pamphlet, [The Future Party](#), Peter Hain admits that members have a perception that devolving 'most responsibility for policy-making to the NPF has been used as a means of denying them a say over contentious current policy issues'.

Hain accepts that many members:

'feel marginalised and the PiP framework is losing credibility. I believe that we will struggle to establish ourselves as a true party of government unless we can end the relationship of perpetual distrust between party members and the leadership'.

This distrust is fuelled when, in clear breach of undertakings made in 1997, Ministers announce they will ignore Alternative Positions from the NPF (such as rail re-nationalisation and the fourth option for council tenants) that were carried by Annual Conference, the Party's sovereign body. And the distrust is further fuelled when major controversial policies, such as foundation hospitals and top-up fees, aren't taken through the PiP process at all, but are simply steam rolled through Parliament by leadership diktat. This lack of credibility and distrust helps explain why Party membership has slumped by at least 50% since 1997.

The core problem here is one of apparent irreversibility.

In signing up to the PiP process in the first place, the broader membership handed over all power. Now it does not have the legitimate decision-making power set out in the rules by which to demand back that power.

Checkmate, it would seem, to the PLP and an acquiescent National Executive Committee – acquiescent by means of the design of its membership structure (see the briefing paper links above).

So how, then, faced with these two elephants – of poor reputation and little quasi-judicial power – can the Labour left go forward?

The answer is to change the rules of the chess game unilaterally, and to announce loud and clear, even as steps 1 and 2 get underway, that the rules are going to be changed.

What I would like to see happen is the Labour Representation Committee, and any other Labour left organization that's listening (such as Compass?) announce loud and clear the following policy direction:

- 1. To campaign for the total disaffiliation of all affiliated trade unions currently affiliated to the national Labour party;*
- 2. To campaign concurrently for a re-affiliation by these same trade unions TO CLPs (or branches) with a commitment to the same or more financial contribution;*
- 3. To campaign for the re-affiliation to CLPs of trade unions which have already disaffiliated from the national Labour party;*
- 4. Other Labour party should be invited to follow suit and to devolve their contributions to local Labour level.*

Pretty simple really, as a rallying call, but it's a campaign which would, if successful, have huge impacts upon the way the Labour party both operates, and just as importantly in view of its besmirched reputation, how it is regarded by people on the left outside the labour party, and especially by young people who have never thought it right to go anywhere near the Labour party (see also Step 5 on other measures that need to be taken.

The key impact, obviously, is that the flow of financial resources would be reversed. Unions and ordinary members would start to get a say both on how affairs are run locally, and how their MP (if there is one) represents them, because they hold the purse strings. More critically, the national leadership would lose its de facto power and would need to approach CLPs and, let's say, regional conference, with a 'business plan' to be agreed if it is to get its fund to operate.

Of course, it's never going to be simple to arrange this, and much will depend on the extent to which union members and their branches can exert the required influence over their own leaderships, either by winning votes against leadership advice or by toppling the leaderships.. I won't cover that in detail here, as I'm not qualified to do so (not having been active in a union for a while) but much will depend upon who is correct about 'where the unions are at'.

In [Luke Akehurst's view](#), on the right of the party:

Most active trade unionists do not sit on the left of the Labour Party. They tend because of the nature of trade union activity – representing ordinary working people and negotiating deals with employers – to be pragmatic and moderate.

This is, just as with who actually constitutes the remaining membership party, a matter to be tested empirically, but as with my experience of Labour party membership, I have a decent hunch that Luke is thinking wishfully here; that when offered a real chance to seize real power over 'their' party via a radical move in union policy, we may find a lot of grassroots support at a time when anything that smacks of MP involvement/power bases is something to be distrusted and fought against.

Regular readers of the *Thought Towards Flinch* blog will see that, in this step 3 proposal (but a step to be 'talked up even as we get to step 1) there is a link to the

other proposals for the 'reverse of financial flows' to political parties that I have set out most recently [here](#).

Where I think the strength of this step 3 version lies, over and above the 'legislative/all party version, is that while the latter would need to be accepted and implemented solely on the basis of its appeal to the 'democratic reform' spirit of the existing institutional powers, the former is about a real challenge to those powers based on mass membership and its financial clout.

That is, the legislative liberal reform option won't be accepted, because people in power don't tend to give up power like that. The one based on the recognition of what power and resources actually are, and where relative strengths lie, might.

Of course, having seized greater control over what a labour government must do if its party infrastructure is to be financed, we may at some point be able to force through accompanying legislation which reverses the financial flows of cash over which the unions and the grassroots has no current control, but that's beyond Step 5, so I'll leave it there.

This is the logic for Step 3, but it's not all about logic. What we also need to do in the Labour party is to change the culture of deference that has emerged in the last 20 years. MPs (and as I said in Step 2, councillors) should be regarded not as higher beings, but as our representatives – there to do our bidding, to be commended if they do it well, to be replaced if they do not.

Such a change in mood in the party – the willingness to take matters into our own hands backed by a workable plan to do so – will be more effective than [any policy paper urging us all](#), yet a-bloody-gain, to enter a competition about electoral reform.

#### **Step 4 of 5: The re-conceptualization of campaigning**

This, lest you need reminding, is my five step organisational action plan for the local Labour left. This five step plan is itself the fourth part of a wider six part series on the Labour left generally. When I'm done I'll set it out all as a single pdf file.

Steps [1](#) and [2](#) of the action plan were about how the Left might take over the local parties again, and how it should refocus its efforts on engagement with the working class, not least through engagement with the unions.

[Step 3](#), which has met with a 'cautious' reception to date, is the 'big idea', which seeks both to reclaim real power for a revitalized membership, and to draw in further membership from outside (ex and non-members) with the real promise of democratic centralist influence over party affairs and ultimately party policy.

Step 4 brings us back to earth, and focuses on how we 'campaign' as local parties, and what 'campaigning' should actually mean.

I believe we should seek this transition even if Step 3 – important as it is – doesn't come off, because changing the way we do things at local level, and becoming more successful both non-electorally and electorally, may draw in resources and power from the centre even in the absence of the radical shifts I propose we should struggle for with our trade union comrades.

It's a little schematic, but currently this is what campaigning means for many Labour activists all around the country:

- 1 Printing leaflets with messages about how well the local Labour representatives (MP, councilors, candidates) are doing and how good the Labour government is, asking for help to deliver leaflets, and a grumble sheet destined for a) the contact database b) the casework list of the relevant councilor or MP;
- 2 Delivering the leaflets;
- 3 Canvassing with the national database sheets to hand, identifying voter preference, and picking up case work problems. This is on the phone or on the doorstep;
- 4 Entering the data into the database;
- 5 Campaign meetings, often separate from the CLP main body or executive, to co-ordinate the drafting, the printing, the canvassing, the finance for it all, the timetable, and to draw up an action plan;

And that, essentially, is that. It's focused primarily on winning elections, via 'visibility' of candidates, and by making sure the short electoral season is run efficiently, getting to 'promises' and 'undecideds'

Certainly, there's more room for the political message with the new canvassing system and set of questions, if you're a good enough canvasser, but in the end the objective remains information gathering, storage, analysis and electoral use.

I know these things because I'm good at them; none of it's rocket science.

But it is, essentially, crap.

When done my most people, and most CLPs it treats people like numbers and fails to engage at all meaningfully. That's why people see us coming from behind the tweaked curtain and don't answer the door. That's why people without babies in the bath upstairs say they've got the baby in the bath upstairs (who would generally leave a baby in the bath upstairs?).

Even the very best canvassers – those with the confidence born not just of doing it a lot but also the knowledge base to respond, to draw issues together, to make an action plan in the head as you go down the street – have all heard the less experienced canvasser two doors down saying something, or using an approach that makes you want to a) cringe b) try and get some more training sorted c) cringe.

Come on, admit it, you excellent canvassers (you know who you are). You know who the people are in your CLP that make your heart sink ever so slightly when someone other than them runs the board (and what's that running the board about, anyway?).

No, we need to do campaigning differently. We need to make it a campaign, as in the military sense of the term – a struggle for victory, before another struggle for victory in a long war.

In my mind's eye, there'll be one big indication of getting campaigning right. That'll be when we have campaign meeting which have an agenda about more than one campaign, and a slot for new campaigns.

Sure, lots of campaigns will still involve doorstepping and time on the phone, and there will also always be some scope for [Dan's opening line](#) (see comment 9):

*'I'm just calling round from the Labour party to see if there's any problems we can help you with or any improvement you'd like to see in the area'. In fact that's almost word for word what I say when I'm just out and about.*

But that's not enough in itself, because the problems get atomized, and councillors and activists end up becoming cheap council customer service staff rather than people involved in politics.

Rather, we must have the courage of our socialist convictions, and trust people to vote for us at election time if we campaign for them on all the other things that matter.

It's not that this isn't done in places, and Dan points to excellent examples of it in both [John McDonnell's constituency](#) and [Liam Byrne's](#), but we need to make it the accepted form of campaigning. The features that a new socialist campaigning should have include:

- 1 Newsletters which provide information not just about what Labour's up to, but about what's going on, and in particular about where there is injustice;
- 2 Newsletters which invite contribution and which actually pick up those contributions and take them forward;
- 3 A willingness of CLP activists to engage with non-Labour action, and to take the Labour hat off while engaging, but to ensure that it is fed back into newsletters (and accompanying websites);
- 4 A conscious move away from a simply focus on candidate 'visibility' to proper engagement;
- 5 A move towards the development of social enterprise/co-operative publication of newsletters, with people (not necessarily Labour members) getting paid to do, in the manner of the [LeftNewMedia](#)-related proposals set out, in relation to printed material, by my colleague Dave [here](#), and then in much greater detail in relation to local activism [here](#).
6. A willingness and even determination not simply to focus campaigning efforts on housing areas, but to get into workplaces, especially with a view to unionization, initially through newsletter drops to canteens etc. in places where we know people will chew over what's written with work colleagues (this was very effective as a measure when I was a trade unionist in hospitals);

Is that an easy shift?

Of course it isn't. Most active campaigners have never known anything other than the Labour canvassing board, and even members who still don't get the rationale of the canvass board and data entry/analysis tend to pretend that they're up to dare with it all.

The key pint is, though, that the focus on Contract Creator and all that goes with it is a huge opportunity costs, and also creates both an intra-party cultural blockage to 'proper' campaign and worker struggle.

Controversially, I know, what leftwing CLP should do at an early stage is to get rid of contact creator, get rid of the canvass boards and the regular Saturday mornings, and thus make a clear statement; we are about socialist campaigning, not number crunching.

The effects of our Voter ID has can be significant when it comes to election time, but the remain relatively marginal compared with bigger swings in popular feeling, whether that be about who to vote for, or whether to vote for any of the bastards at all.

Much better, I contend, to put all that energy and time into connecting more properly with working people, and have the confidence to know that efforts will be repaid (and of course, an early newsletter can send out that message).

Of course it can't happen before this general election. I'm realistic. We are too set in our ways to make it happen now, and not enough CLPs are under leftwing control to give it the critical mass it needs to take hold,

But along with Steps 1 to 3, it should be part of the grand plan to move away what's been imposed on us by a New Labour hierarchy keen to make us doorstep cannon fodder.

In step 5, I'll be looking at working with the rest of the best of the left (*unfinished*)

