

A RADICAL MANIFESTO FOR
A CREDIBLE OPPOSITION

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A RADICAL MANIFESTO FOR A CREDIBLE OPPOSITION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When the financial crash of 2008 occurred, many on the Left thought that their time had finally arrived. The news of banks crashing, the economy going south because of the supposedly reckless whims of capitalism, were interpreted in leftist circles as the moment when the western masses would at last see the merits of socialism.

It was not to be. In fact, in the half-decade following the financial crash the centre-right found itself in the ascendancy and the centre-left found itself in retreat. There were many reasons for this – the fact that people tend to vote for centre-right parties when they worry about their finances coupled with the centre-left being in power across Europe when the crash took place – but a large one has to be that while the centre-right had a clear narrative and answers, the centre-left appeared to be all out of ideas.

Yet in the last few years, things have grown even worse for the centre-left. Replacing the centre-right as the new dominant voice in western politics is the rise of the extremes of both the Right and the Left. This can be seen in Jeremy Corbyn becoming leader of the Labour Party, in Donald Trump being the Republican candidate for US president, in the rise of UKIP and the unexpected vote to leave the EU in June of this year. The final example on that list is likely to lead to an even greater post-Brexit rise in support for UKIP under a new leader – or a new grouping of the far-right that may even be capable of winning a general election.

The centre-left needs a fresh approach if it wishes to electorally succeed again and this paper is one such vision of how the centre-left could proceed in a post-Brexit vote Britain.

Twenty years ago, the Labour Party under Tony Blair put forward a pledge card – commitments their government would promise to make reality. A simple way to put across the idea of what could make a centre-left party electable again is imagining what the equivalent of Labour's 1997 election pledge card would look like in 2016, examining what sort of commitments a centre-left government that was serious about winning power would announce.

This paper's idea for five pledges that a centre-left party aspiring to govern could put forth are:

1. An end to austerity via large capital projects, particularly transportation infrastructure outside of London
2. An English parliament to settle the devolution project and the West Lothian question for good, to be set in an English city outside of London
3. No income tax rises on middle earners for the length of one parliament
4. A community banking structure to be established that will allow for more investment in small businesses and start ups
5. Britain to build the number of new homes it needs, with priority given to first time buyers

One of the core themes that emerges from the five pledges this paper suggests a centre-left party serious about governing commits to is addressing regional inequality. One of the main factors for both the rise of UKIP as a political force and the vote to leave the EU that followed was the feeling that London had been helped to recover from the 2008 crash while the rest of Britain (particularly England) had been left behind. Unless the centre-left addresses this problem with authority, the far-right will own that space for the foreseeable future.

It is the contention of this paper that unless the centre-left manages to present a coherent and believable strategy for government, it will not only never govern again, but may in fact cease to be a mainstream political ideology in Britain at some point in the near future. After the vote to leave the EU in June, the country is realigning itself into a liberal internationalist wing and a socially conservative nationalist wing. Both could be considered to be of the Right, with a centre-right versus far-right battle for the electorate to possibly squeeze the centre-left out altogether.

All of this is important to the country as a whole for a very simple reason: at the very least, the UK needs a credible opposition. It does not have one at present. This will have all sorts of negative implications for Great Britain if it is not addressed promptly. The centre-left needs to figure out what it wants to say and then reinsert itself into the national conversation. It needs to do so quickly.

1. INTRODUCTION: HOW THE CENTRE LEFT GOT TO WHERE IT FINDS ITSELF NOW

The vote to leave the European Union on June 23, 2016 was the most seismic political event in Britain since the end of the Second World War. It was also a demonstrable failure of the centre-left in terms of ideas and campaigning. Many of the voters who put an X for Leave were either current or former Labour voters, angry at globalisation and even the centre-left itself for offering no answers to the problems they see their country facing.

The centre-left was already in crisis all across Europe before June 23rd. Since the 2008 financial crash, the political initiative had mostly been seized by the centre-right, with some ground given to the extremes of both Left and Right (the rise of the far-right a trend which is worryingly on the rise). This is as true in Britain as it is anywhere on the continent.

The centre-right, in the wake of the financial crisis, came up with a relatively simple narrative to sell to the public: we will keep the ship steady. Part of the reason this worked was because the centre-left was in government across much of Europe when the 2008 crash occurred. But the centre-left in Britain since that time has struggled to come up with anything that has had enough salience with the public to win a general election, cementing the notion that it was the paucity of centre-left ideas that contributed to the crash taking place (fairly or unfairly).

Another part of the post-financial crash problem for the centre-left has been its veering further to the left, away from the centre. This began shortly after the crash happened, with many on the Left thinking that the implications of the crisis would mean the time for more solidly socialist thinking was at hand. Despite this being evidently not the case, much of the Left has persisted in this fantasy.

Perhaps the Leave vote, despite its negative implications, can be a chance for a rethink on the destructive path the centre-left has gone down since 2008. For as much as the vote for Brexit was a huge defeat for the British centre-left, it does offer at the exact same time a huge opportunity for progressives as well. The “we steady the ship” narrative of the centre-right has taken a huge hit with the vote to leave the EU – it is one the centre-left

will have a limited time in which to truly capitalise on, however, and it must be mindful of the fact that the far-right are in a better place to do so as it stands.

Despite the mire that left of centre thinking, organisation and politics finds itself in at present, it still seems likely that a party that defines itself as being of the centre-left will win a general election once again in the relatively near future in Britain. That centre-left party of government could be one that does not exist at present. Some new version of the SDP that works this time round, for example; or it could be an existing entity that currently sits in the margins such as the Liberal Democrats; or it could be some combination of Labour and other parties, some that exist at present and others yet to be born.

Yet if history tells us anything, it is that the Labour brand is remarkably strong and that the party's ability to bounce back from seeming oblivion to not only relevance but also governance is uncanny (Scotland is the fly in the ointment of this theory but that will be dealt with directly in a later chapter). The most likely scenario is that Labour will find some way to become electable once again, post-Corbyn.

Having said that, it is worth examining just what a precarious state the Labour Party is in at present in detail and how it got there in the first place. When one examines the reasons why former Labour voters plumped for the Tories in May 2015 (taken from research conducted by the Labour Party itself no less), a conclusion would have to be reached that the next leader following Ed Miliband should have been the opposite in almost every conceivable way to Jeremy Corbyn. Someone outside of the "London middle-class elite"; someone who was demonstrably patriotic; someone willing to voice an economic alternative to the Tories that was not either Tory-lite or 70s style British Marxism.

Many pundits speculate that the "membership situation" facing the Labour Party is irretrievable; that essentially, the leftwards drift is now baked in, trapped in a negative feedback loop. More far-left members join, pushing more moderate folk out, meaning there is a greater and greater concentration of far-left people in the membership, meaning less moderate people join, and on and on. This could indeed turn out to be the case – and

the theory is about to be tested in reality very soon. If it cannot gain new, electable leadership, Labour is finished as a general election winning machine and something will take its place on the centre-left in due course, just as Labour replaced the Liberals in the early 20th century.

In 1981, the Labour Party split. The SDP was formed with a view to replacing the Labour Party as the natural and dominant body of the centre-left within the two-party system. This failed to happen and quite quickly as well: the 1983 general election brought the SDP-Liberal Alliance 25% of the vote – and only 23 seats. This experiment in reinventing the centre-left crash-landed shortly after take-off. Meanwhile, as extremely bad as Labour's 1983 election was (easily their worst since the war), the party at least ended up with 209 seats. The concentration of the Labour vote in urban and industrial areas meant the party could hold onto enough to rebuild itself, while the SDP was destined to merge with the Liberals to form a new third party before the end of the decade.

Tony Blair became leader of the Labour Party in the summer of 1994, just over eleven years after the crushing of 1983. Three years later, the party won a still amazing 179-seat majority, reducing the Tories to a mere 165 seats all told, in the 1997 general election. This was a truly remarkable turnaround in terms of ideological and practical restructuring when one considers the "longest suicide note in history". It demonstrates that Labour can rebuild itself when the party unites and applies its collective mind to the task of doing so.

Like all governments, the one constructed by New Labour eventually ran out of steam. Despite people writing off the Conservative Party for seemingly the rest of time in the early years of the 21st century (which stands as a lesson for those writing off Labour now), saner political minds knew that the Tories would eventually get themselves together, elect a leader of prime ministerial ability, and then reassert what they would deem to be the natural order of things. All of this was accelerated by the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003 as well as other crucial errors made by the governments of the New Labour period. Worse, when the election that was to place Labour back into opposition came in 2010, it was with a large, recent financial crash still in the front of people's minds, one that shouldn't have taken place according to New Labour orthodoxy. Worse still from a Labour perspective, the Liberal Democrats, the old SDP-Liberal merger bunch, formed a coalition government with the Conservatives.

After the general election defeat and the formation of the Coalition came a new Labour leadership contest, one that David Miliband was widely expected to win beforehand. In an electoral system grouped into thirds (MPs, members, and trade unionists), Ed Miliband, David's brother, surprised everyone by winning the contest, albeit via the trade union vote – the members and the MPs voting for David (Ed ending up getting rid of the electoral system that won him the leadership during his time in charge, interestingly enough).

Ed's time as leader was notable for two things: one, a soft shift to the left from the New Labour days, and two, what was known as the "35% strategy". This latter item of note revolved around an expectation that the Coalition would fall apart prior to the next scheduled general election in 2015, and that in the election that was to take place sometime between 2011 and 2013 the collapse of the Lib Dem vote would result directly in a Labour majority. This created a sense of complacency within the party: although many felt that Ed wasn't cutting through to the public at large, the 35% strategy meant that getting someone new in was out of the question. If a general election could be called at any moment, it was best to be prepared and besides, that would be an election destined to be won by default regardless.

As it turns out, all of the assumptions contained within the 35% strategy were entirely incorrect. The Coalition lasted the full five-year term; at the end of it, the predicted Lib Dem electoral collapse did indeed take place, but almost entirely to the benefit of the Tories (which any half-decent psephologist could have foretold would happen, given the seats in question). The Conservative Party ended up not only back in government again, but this time with a slim majority.

In the summer of 2015, a new leadership contest to find Ed Miliband's replacement was conducted. It led to a little known backbencher of thirty-two years, Jeremy Corbyn, one who belongs to the far-left wing of the party, becoming the surprise winner. A large part of why this happened was down to the non-Corbyn candidates playing a similar game to the one they had done for decades with the far-left - "Oh, Jeremy's policies are wonderful but they'll never win a general election, will they?" – combined with a genuine lack of new ideas from any of the traditionally stronger wings of the party, from Blairites to Brownites to the Soft Left.

The result of this history has left the centre-left with only one option if it wishes to survive: come up with those ideas that the Liz Kendall and Yvette Cooper leadership campaigns appeared to be lacking in the summer and autumn of 2015. This is the main purpose of this paper: to examine what policies, strategies and outlook could be used by the centre-left should it wish to govern again in the near future.

Some of the suggestions in this paper could be deemed radical. Yet without radical ideas the centre-left could be doomed to die out as a mainstream ideological mode of thought. If this sounds impossible, ask yourself this: what does the centre-left exist to do? In other words, now that British Conservatives have mostly accepted social liberalism and the need for some form of welfare state (although on a smaller level, admittedly, than many on the centre-left would desire) what agenda could a party of the centre-left possibly stand on that would be both inspiring and believable at the same time? This paper attempts to examine these questions in depth.

As the EU referendum campaigns demonstrated, British politics is splitting into a liberal internationalist wing and a socially conservative nationalist wing. Either could be characterised as being of the Right. This is worth bearing in mind when examining the challenges facing the centre-left. If the radical centre is not seized upon by the centre-left, the centre-right will only strengthen its claim to this ground, regardless of how bad the post-Brexit fallout might turn out to be. British politics could easily become a straight battle between the centre-right and the far-right for supremacy.

2. WHY SOCIALISM IS THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The problem with how to deal with socialism within the Labour Party goes back to Blair's leadership and demonstrates how and why it was relatively simple for the far-left to gain control over the Labour Party's central mechanisms in 2015. There has always been a deep seated fear of denouncing socialism fully within Labour circles; of making the leap that many other centre-left European parties have done over the years in embracing social democracy wholeheartedly, essentially leaving most of Marx in the dust.

The Left in Britain has been stuck between two opposite directions of travel since at least 2008 – and not just in regards to welfare but on the bigger picture stuff as well. One direction involves a yearning for the past – the spirit of '45, "let's reopen the coal mines somehow", a wish to revisit the battles of the 80s and win this time round – the other, a belief in a bright future, one the Left is willing to come before its time without any of the painful readjustments and difficult problems that will be unavoidable. In this latter way of thinking, the wish to get round the tricky choices that will have to be made over the next few decades as mechanisation makes certain jobs and even whole industries redundant is all encompassing. It is built on a desire to jump past the transitional period and imagine we are already in a place where mechanisation has made the underlying economic need to work redundant.

How to handle the twin forces of mechanisation and globalisation is a problem that has plagued the centre-left for a decade at least, and was no doubt a major factor in the decision of many working-class voters to choose Brexit. Should the Left resist those modernising forces with everything they have got - or give in to it and try and reap the upsides to it all while ameliorating the downsides? They are mutually exclusive worldviews and yet many people across left-wing politics, even if it is unconscious, hold both

views simultaneously. Again, this split was cruelly exposed during the EU referendum campaign.

It is the supposition of this paper that the only way forward for the centre-left, if it wishes to carry on as mainstream ideology, is to let go of the past and figure out what the future holds and what a centre-left version of that future looks like. However, the problems really begin in earnest when one attempts to work out what an accelerationist centre-left position actually looks and feels like in real terms. Does the centre-left chuck in the towel on trying to maintain any sort of communitarianism of the kind that used to exist in a past period of mass industrialisation? What answers can the centre-left come up with to manage the transition from where we are now (which causes it enough problems already) to one in which there are huge job losses amongst their traditional voter base through mechanisation but can at the same time free people from the need to work menial jobs, an aspiration of many on the liberal left? Without answers to these questions, the centre-right and/or the far-right could be dominant during the whole of this transitional, first half of the 21st century period as the centre-left has no answers and people vote Conservative (or for far-right parties) to hang on as tightly as possible to what remains of the past.

Looking to the future by definition means letting go of socialism as it has been traditionally thought of and presented. If the only way that the centre-left feels it can continue is as a purely socialist venture, it will fail, not only in Britain but everywhere in the western world. Saying that orthodox Marxism is something that should be left behind in the discarded wreckage of the Berlin Wall does not make one a conservative. In fact, in order to make real socialism work, any government adopting it would need to embrace a lot of conservatism to make it function at all, as numerous examples from the 20th century bear witness to.

The biggest problem with the British Left sticking to traditional socialism is that the very basis on which Marx and Engels designed it is very rapidly falling apart completely. The whole notion of the “industrial proletariat” is

becoming an arcane one, and will almost certainly be completely obsolete in fifty years' time as mechanisation takes its full effect.

One of the things that Third Way politics achieved in the 1990s was drawing a massive, stone-lined wall between socialism and social democracy. While a great deal of 1990s politics now seems arcane and no longer relevant (as it should as well, being two decades past now) this was key in a way that is still resonant today. Some on the Right (and indeed they get a lot of help in this from the far-left) may wish to dilute the differences between the two, when in actual fact they are very much separate ideological trains of thought. The difference between socialism and social democracy, never mind social liberalism, is not talked about nearly enough in Britain.

Socialism, if it accepts social democracy at all, only does so through gritted teeth; it takes it on board as a stage on the road to socialism, from there towards full-blown communism. Socialism is utopian in nature; it is on a mission to free humanity from all conceivable burdens, something that is – like all utopian aims – completely impossible.

Social democracy on the other hand seeks to pragmatically make society more equal through whatever means are functional and do not hurt the economy, as hurting the economy would undermine the whole process of creating a more equal society from the start. Social democracy does not fetishise equality the way that socialism does either. Within socialism, an equal yet much poorer society would be a better society. Social democracy recognises that equality measures are only valid when they bring living standards up overall, not down in any desirable set of circumstances.

Socialism struggles greatly with democracy. It can only operate by definition in a so-called “dictatorship of the proletariat”, a political situation in which the work of socialism can go on, unimpeded by the will of the people who may wish for a change of government at some stage thus bringing the socialist work programme to a halt. Social democracy, as the nomenclature implies directly, cannot even function without democratic legitimacy. It requires not only the will of the people but their guiding hand to spell out

when things are moving too fast or too slowly for their comfort.

Social democracy – and this is the key point of this paper’s entire argument on the subject – is an end in and of itself. It is not a staging point for a utopia that exists at some point down the road. It is a completely self-contained idea of how society should look and function.

In order to regain power, the British Left must first relinquish socialism and accept social democracy fully. This has never really been done in this country and will be difficult for many. In a sense, the 1981 split in Labour was an attempt to achieve this very thing – and when the SDP failed to breakthrough, the conversation was once again shut down. But if this transformation could be achieved then the centre-left (with all of the Left on its side) would have an ideology that could achieve all of the goals it has at heart while getting the swing voting public to buy into their vision and reject the Right.

If the Left cannot let go of socialism, it will die out as a mainstream ideology throughout the western world. The 20th century should have taught the Left two things. One, that socialism does not work. Two, that social democracy can work if it does so effectively. In order to do so, it requires a policy agenda that is both inspiring and credible at the same time.

3. A NEW POLICY AGENDA FOR THE CENTRE-LEFT

The big problem the Left has faced since 2008 has been finding a new, post-financial crash narrative. Something that could take the place of Blairism which remains progressive and accelerationist as opposed to nostalgic. Thus far it has been unable to come up with anything coherent. This is not simply a British problem; otherwise, there may be something from continental models from which the British centre-left could borrow. The problems only mount for the centre-left now: in addition to figuring out what post-2008 should look like, it now has to consider what a post-Brexit future might be as well.

I will preface this chapter by discussing both broad themes as well as specific things the broader centre-left should not do (or possibly, that it should get over once and for all) before outlining specific policies, categorised under eleven major headings: trade union reform, immigration, regional regeneration, welfare and work, macroeconomics, home affairs, education, housing, transport, health and finally, foreign affairs.

The centre-left must get over its public sector good, private sector bad mentality if it wishes to remain relevant. A much more progressive way to look at the public/private split is that both can do good things and bad things; both have mechanisms that are able to lift poor people out of poverty, while both can make wealth gaps even wider. Mostly it comes down to monopolies and their negative side effects, usually caused by a lack of fear of succession (in other words, when there is no incentive for a good service to be provided because the contracts involved will automatically get renewed regardless, bad practice almost inevitably settles in).

Part of this adjustment is that the centre-left also needs to think more often about public services from a consumer point of view as opposed to a provider one. By ensuring that people get good public services that they

cherish, jobs in the public sector will be protected. Unfortunately, within current Left orthodoxy, this more often than not is thought about the opposite way round. This reversal is key.

The centre-left also needs to stop thinking about jobs as if they still existed in the same way they did back in 1972. Nostalgia must be banished from centre-left thinking, particularly any sort of plan to take the country back to a supposedly “golden era”. The vast number of people in the 21st century will not have jobs for life. The centre-left should stop expending energy attempting to stop this from happening and accept it as the way things are. From there, they can then look at ways to palliate the worst elements of what this brings while simultaneously looking at ways in which the new ways of working can actually help poorer communities and individuals.

1) Trade unions should be modernised

Since 1980, membership of trade unions as a proportion of the total working population has been halved², from around 50% then to about a quarter of the workforce today. Union membership at present amongst the low paid is a paltry 13%.

As this has taken place, there has been a parallel trend: the trade unions, at least at the very top of many of the major organisations in question, have become more and more militantly leftist. The two have played off each other to create another negative feedback loop the left of centre could do without - a couple more decades of this sort of thing could see collectivised labour of any description disappear in any meaningful way from the British vocational landscape.

Trade unionism was an essential part of Labour replacing the Liberal Party as the main centre-left political organisation in Great Britain. The Liberals were too slow to realise both the power and the necessity of collectivised labour in the early 20th century and its decline was directly related to this

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2. www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-19521535

failing. The central reason for Labour's rise as a major party, in other words, is tied to the power of trade unionism.

However, the trade unions relationship with the Labour Party hasn't always been completely healthy for Labour – or indeed for the unions themselves. Involvement in party politics so directly has meant that unions have remained overly politicised.

Trade unions need to serve the new economy; they cannot fight against the way the world is going. Instead they need to ensure that people don't get left behind as it rolls forward. Unions need to accept the way things are in the 21st century and look to new markets – the world of flexible working, for example – to gain new members. Instead of looking at people who drive Uber taxis for as leeches on the black cab trade, why not try and unionise them? People have always mostly joined a union out of a sort of insurance policy – having someone to turn to if things go wrong – and this can apply to any area of work, not just the old industrial era trades.

All of this is less of a put down to the way trade unions current function than may come across. Unions in 2016 are busy firefighting on so many fronts that inventing new and radical ways of expanding are often the last thing on their staff's minds. With that said, without new thinking about direction, this paper's dire warnings about the future of trade unionism stand.

The unions can't do this by themselves. The centre-left needs to politically push this need to expand trade union membership, depoliticise trade unionism, while at the same time seeking ways to gain trade unions more power. A good international comparison would be Sweden: the unions there do not stage endless strikes and demonstrations because they do not need to. So much of the populace is unionised that the private sector can simply not avoid talking with them. As a result, the rights of more and more workers are properly looked after – which must surely be the aim of the whole project.

2) The “I” word

One of the things that is a festering problem for centre-left thinking is what to say on immigration. There have been two approaches to this topic over the last ten years from centre-left figures. One has been to shrug off the problem; say something vague along the lines of “immigration has done some good things too, you know” and change the subject quickly. The other has been to adopt a UKIP-lite approach. This involves saying that immigration is a real problem while trying to sound slightly less racist about it all than parties of the far-right do when sounding off on the subject.

Neither approach to this policy area will work for the centre-left. But in order to understand why immigration is such a salient issue for a large amount of British voters – and core Labour voters at that – we need to go back to 2004.

EU immigration into the UK used to be relatively low. This is why it was not that large an issue in the British public consciousness for a protracted period of time. Then in 2004, a lot changed. Ten countries joined the EU – most notably for the purposes of what we are discussing here, Poland. Due to fears regarding an influx of immigrants leaving these mostly poorer countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the EU took the step of introducing transitional controls on migrants from the new members of the Union. Already existing member states could introduce a wide range of controls on migration from the joining countries so long as they were all lifted prior to May 1st, 2011. It was a seven-year grace period, if you will.

For whatever reasons, only the UK, Ireland and Sweden amongst EU nations decided to not impose any transitional controls whatsoever and allow citizens of the ten joining countries full freedom of movement access immediately. It isn’t much of a surprise in retrospect that all of them received a large influx of immigrants. Particularly the UK, with a much more multicultural society than the Swedes, and this led to over half a million Poles immigrating to the UK in a short period of time.

This sudden influx of eastern European immigrants has been the root cause of the resentment towards immigrants since that time, and a big reason for the rise of UKIP. There have been other factors that have contributed to these trends – the expenses scandal of 2009 creating a mistrust of politicians that hasn't return to pre-scandal levels for instance – but the large scale immigration from 2004 onwards, and the failure of the political establishment to explain this phenomenon, has been the biggest single factor in the still growing anti-immigration feeling in British life.

In some ways, a post-Brexit Britain may make it easier to talk about immigration, if freedom of movement is removed. That is far from guaranteed, however (at least at the time of writing) and so expecting this problem to go away will not work.

What happened in 2004 needs to be fully explained, as does the fact that limiting freedom of movement does not halt globalisation or its effect on poorer communities. Even if labour cannot move, capital will still be free to go anywhere it chooses. Tackling regional inequality must be a core focus of any centre-left government.

Other than this, the centre-left needs to rediscover its internationalism and part of this is being essentially pro-immigration within reason. The centre-left blaming immigrants for housing shortages or job losses is doing the work of the centre-right for them and undercuts several of the centre-left's principle economic arguments.

3) Regenerating areas of England outside of London

This needs to be perhaps the primary message of any centre-left party that wishes to govern again in Britain: that they will do all they can to make regional inequality on the levels seen today a thing of the past. That party needs to mean it as well.

A huge factor in what became a Leave vote in the EU referendum was that certain areas of the country felt excluded from prosperity on the same level that other parts of the country enjoy, most particularly the level of wealth

experienced by Londoners. This looks set to get worse with the Brexit vote, as sadly those who voted Leave in order to make their lives better will have actually made them worse.

Trying to make different parts of England in particular more economically equal has been an intractable problem for the centre-left for the last two decades at least. But there are answers out there.

Part of this is infrastructure, partly in transport (which leads to housing), partly in education (which leads from housing). Part of it is cultural investment – trying to move parts of the arts and culture crowd out of London to make other cities more cosmopolitan, thus more attractive to those with money, thus attracting more money to cities in England outside of London.

But something major needs to happen to make England less London-centric and to halt the yawning gap in terms of economic levels and cultural attitudes between the capital and the rest of the country. It also has to be something entirely within the aegis of the political class as well. The centre-left should get behind the idea of an English parliament, with the explicit tenet that it is located in Manchester or Birmingham or somewhere other than London. This idea is explored in more depth in the next chapter.

4) Welfare and work

The centre-left (and Labour in particular) has to be about work and working people. It is the essence of the Labour brand – the clue being in the name. The party has allowed its enemies to paint it as the party of only the underclass since 2010, an image that has proven as toxic as it has been unshakable.

The problem is that the Treasury under Osborne went too far on welfare cuts in some instances – but not as far as the Left have tried to claim, undermining Labour's role in the debate. Whenever the chancellor put a potentially suicidal move forth it was withdrawn, either through pressure applied by Liberal Democrat ministers, or after the 2015 general election by

MPs inside his own party (the disability cuts put forth in the 2016 budget but then removed because of inter-Tory rumblings being a good case in point). As a result, the centre-left seem out of touch with the rest of the country – and with their core vote – on the subject of benefits. The debate appears to be taking place entirely on the centre-right.

The centre-left needs to be seen to be fair on benefits more than anything else. It also needs to recognise that getting people back into work needs to be the priority over things like enshrining benefits as inalienable rights. Disability benefits should be vigorously protected by the centre-left, but on all else they need to be seen as a protective measure as opposed to a way of propping up economic failure.

A new raid on workers' benefits and rights may be coming post-Brexit. The centre-left must be extra vigilant in protecting these – or promising to re-establish benefits and rights that get axed after the UK leaves the EU.

5) A new economic vision for Britain

The largest problem for centre-left parties across Europe since 2008, including British Labour, has been finding a new narrative and plan of action in regards to the economy. In the absence of this, the centre-right have been able to present their vision of the economy almost unimpeded. Tackling this problem is possibly the most difficult hurdle for the centre-left to jump over – but if done successfully, it would mean that swing voters could trust the centre-left again with the economy.

The centre-left needs to champion the needs of what Ed Miliband described as the “squeezed middle” – and really mean it this time. The pledge should be explicit: no income tax rises on middle earners – the “middle” in this case defined most importantly in this case in economic terms as opposed to the traditional class definition - during the course of one parliament. The attack the centre-right can make that electing a centre-left government would mean higher taxes for those in the middle would be cut off from the start.

In terms of austerity, this would be softened through capital projects in

transportation and housing mostly. One caveat on this is that tax receipts may be so badly hit by Brexit that even spending on capital projects becomes difficult.

It must be explained to the public, simply and straightforwardly, that there is a difference between normal spending (which will remain flat) and capital projects (which will increase). The difference and the centre-left's intentions in this regard needs to be drilled into the public consciousness through message discipline of the highest order.

As part of a new focus on workers, there should also be a means of reaching out to small business owners, many of whom vote centre-right because they feel the centre-left does not care about them. Therefore, setting up a community bank system should be a priority for any incoming centre-left government. The essence of the policy is to aid the establishment of smaller banks, closer to the people, where the needs of those who use them theoretically matches up with those running them and working for the community banks, thus less distant, centralised decision making is done. It's basically a devolution of the banking system. The Westminster government would have to allow the regulatory framework for them to be possible, and some form of underwriting the initial project would have to be done, but within a decade the whole system should be self-sufficient.

6) Crime and punishment

A constant moan of the far-left is that Labour would have won the 1997 general election regardless of platform, and that as a result Tony Blair "gave away too much" to the Right in pursuit of victory. This is very clearly nonsense – the very notion that a party can win a majority of seats in a parliamentary general election by default, just by not being the party everyone has supposedly had enough of, has been shown to be false time and time again (2015 wasn't a half bad example of this, when you take Miliband's 35% strategy into account).

However, on crime and punishment, the far-left may have a point. Blair, as

you'll recall, said that Labour would be "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime", and indeed his government lived up to this. The Asbos, the curtailment of civil liberties post-9/11, the CCTV cameras everywhere – the centre-left went so far in this direction the Conservatives started being able to attack Labour from the left on these issues (a good example being ID cards).

Michael Gove has embraced the idea of trying to reduce the prison population through criminal justice reform. It is time the centre-left gave it another try as well. A centre-left British government should look at Nordic models of rehabilitation, with a focus on bringing down reoffending as much as possible.

7) Education, education, education

The centre-left must think of education as key to its entire political future for several reasons: one, if done right, it should act as the greatest possible equality making device, at least when looked at across a long period of time; two, it is a way to convince a lot of current Middle England Tory voters that the centre-left has one of their premier interests at heart (the worry about their children's education being a large concern for this group of people); and three, it is a way to convince the next generation of voters to vote along centre-left lines.

With this in mind, most current education policy on the centre-left makes very little sense. The objection to academies is mostly based on the sort of nostalgic thinking decried in previous chapters of this paper - the idea that the public sector as conceived in a prior era is always the way things should be done by default. Better schools remaining free at the point of use is something the centre-left should champion, not attempt to shout down. The academies as set up since 2010 have had the most effect on inner cities – in other words, areas where Labour has historically done well. Perhaps there are better ways of bringing up standards for schools in poorer areas than those put into action since 2010 – but that means new ideas in this area, not a reversion to an older way that didn't work.

In fact, the centre-left should aim to go further than the Tories and insist that all schools be brought up to at least a minimum standard – and continue to raise that minimum bar, year after year. So long as schools stay truly public (in other words, open to everyone with children and a legal right to be in the country, free of charge), the centre-left should adopt a pragmatic approach to how this is achieved.

In summary: the centre-left should admit that the Tories had a good idea in terms of free schools while looking to improve on the areas where there has been too much ideological zealotry. Core curriculum needs to be re-evaluated and strengthened as part of greater oversight of the Free Schools system.

8) New houses for a new generation

One of the key gripes from young people today is that getting on to the housing market is impossible. They have good reason to be upset – the average age of a first time house buyer in the UK is now 31³. The centre-left must promise to build the new homes that Britain needs and deliver on this when it comes to power.

The centre-left must pledge to build the number of homes Britain needs every year, continue to deliver on this pledge should it get into government, and do so through any means required. It should be done with a private/public mixture of funds – the more private that can be involved, the better. While some of this should be rebuilding social housing stock lost to the Right to Buy schemes over the years, the majority of the houses built in the early years of the next centre-left government should be affordable homes meant to be bought by people on median to low incomes. This is actually the portion of the policy that must be stressed beyond all others: the centre-left wants to take the burden of not being able to afford a home off of average families and young people starting out, looking to get a foot on the property ladder.

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3. www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/business/money/mortgage_and_property/article1567738.ece

The way to do this is multi-faceted, with each part reliant on the others in order to work:

- a). a centre-left government must spend on infrastructure and help with red tape clearing in order to make the land both available and affordable.
- b). a centre-left government must underwrite some of the costs for smaller companies in the housing sector in order to diversify the market.
- c). prioritise first time buyers by setting up waiting lists for new affordable housing, done by region. The numbers here should fuel the local targets.

9) Progressive transportation policy

The Left in general has become more and more anti-large transport infrastructure projects over the last decade – for reasons that are hard to fathom once you look past the localised debates on the subject. This is particularly the case when you consider the fact that large scale transportation projects are a way for the state to spend on infrastructure, something which comes with the added bonus of creating jobs at the same time.

Commuting is the way of both the present and the future. While a centre-left government looks to rebalance regional disparity, it will need to do so through encouraging investment in large English cities outside of London and making each of these cities as accessible as possible to each other and to London. If more people can work in large cities while living in rural or non-hub areas, then regional inequality will begin to lessen as a result.

A centre-left party wishing to govern should not only promise to push ahead with HS2, it should commit to expanding the project further. An HS3 should look at connecting the northern cities – Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield – by a high speed rail line. There should also be plans to link Glasgow and Edinburgh to the northern English cities via a high speed rail line.

10) An NHS for the 21st century

Over the last decade, centre-left thinking in Britain on the NHS can be summarised in one phrase: throw more money at the problem and hope for the best. This isn't good enough. The centre-left is broadly trusted on health, so it shouldn't be the focus of campaigning that it has been in recent years (weak points such as the centre-left's take on the economy need to be dealt with instead). However, the centre-left must have something more coherent to say on the topic other than simply protecting the Health Service's budget.

The centre-left should explore Scandinavian models of providing public health. This will challenge several shibboleths in this regard on the British Left. One is that any private involvement in health provision is by definition a bad thing. Another thing the centre-left should challenge is over centralisation – as part of its drive to localise power, health decisions should be part of this.

What should be sacrosanct is that everyone gets treatment without payment at the point of need. Everything else the centre-left should be open to discussing.

11) Foreign policy

The scars of Iraq must once and for all be truly buried. The US and the UK starting a war in the Middle East in 2003 was a bad idea, most of us can agree on that these days; yet that does not mean that being isolationist is thus a good idea, nor indeed a very left-wing idea at that. While the neo-conservative concept of being able to shape the world in a more "liberal" direction should be rejected by the centre-left, it does not mean that foreign military intervention should be ruled out. When Britain can intervene in an already active war zone to try and bring a conflict to an end, while giving ballast to humanitarian aid efforts, then it should always seriously consider it. Obviously, the UK cannot help in every situation. Neither can the US or NATO for that matter. But it should be seriously

considered when necessary.

Relating this back to Iraq: British involvement in that war and its aftermath in 2003 means that fallout from the conflict is to some extent our moral responsibility. It is odd that people on the Left can tweet pictures of Syrian refugees living in horrible conditions without ever stopping to even consider that one way to have stopped the situation they decry from having happened might well have been to have intervened militarily in Syria at a time when it could have made a real difference. One cannot be isolationist in terms of military policy and then internationalist in terms of human rights and living standards in other countries – there is an inherent logical paradox involved in that.

The centre-left must once again be outward looking and willing to defend its values abroad if necessary. Post-Brexit vote, the urge to become isolationist will grow on both the British centre-right and centre-left. The centre-left must reclaim its internationalist roots.

4. A NEW UK-WIDE DEVOLUTION SETTLEMENT: AN ENGLISH PARLIAMENT

A large section of the New Labour project was about devolution. It wasn't long after Tony Blair became prime minister that referenda were established to usher in a Scottish parliament and a Welsh Assembly. Given Northern Ireland already had a devolved parliament, that meant the only portion of the UK to not have its own separate body became England.

There are many factors which led to a leave vote in the EU referendum, but a large one was creeping English nationalism and the sense amongst many English voters that they had not been listened to for a very long time. The centre-right haven't been brilliant in this regard, but they haven't had to be any better as the centre-left have been terrible on this subject.

All of these problems have deepened what is known as the West Lothian question: why do Scottish MPs get to vote on issues related only to England, while English MPs are obviously excluded from voting on issues that have been devolved to the Scottish parliament? There have been many attempts to solve this quandary through half-measures, such as the unforgettably named EVEL (English Votes for English Laws), in which some magical formula for excluding Scottish MPs from supposedly English-only legislation would not cause a constitutional crisis. But there is really only one solution to the problem.

The creation of an English parliament has been written off by most of the body politic for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is that given England comprises 85% of the UK's population, the creation of an English Parliament would greatly weaken the powers of the House of Commons. This is an obvious outcome of such a move - but not a reason not to do it in and of itself. The House of Commons exists to give the people of the United Kingdom a democratically formed government; if there is a new and better way to do this in a federal system, the House of Commons' powers should

not be protected out of tradition alone.

Another reason an English parliament is dismissed as an idea is that the whole notion of the parliament existing is framed as being intrinsically nationalistic somehow; of the far-right by its very design. Why the English getting a devolved parliament when the Scots and the Welsh already have one counts as overly nationalistic is a mystery. If anything, an English parliament should dampen the feelings of the uglier side of English nationalism by giving the English their own genuine say in things at the same level as Scotland and Wales already get as a luxury.

These are the only real obstacles put forth as to why an English parliament is not a possibility. Let us examine the ways in which it would be a good thing, particularly if this English parliament was put into another city in England other than London, and also particularly for the centre-left to embrace as a concept overall:

1. It would complete the New Labour devolution project once and for all.
2. It would solve the West Lothian question.
3. It would devolve power to parliaments all of which are elected by proportional voting systems (an aim of many parts of the Left).
4. It would be a chance to devolve power more locally as part of its very creation.
5. It would be a chance to help regional inequality in England instantly by having power placed somewhere other than London.
6. It would be a chance for the centre-left to reclaim English patriotism.

This last point is not a minor one that has been bolted on, to be clear. In order to appeal to large groups of voters in England who now (or have done since 2010 at least) vote centre-right or even far-right (and voted Leave in large numbers in the EU referendum), the centre-left must rediscover its patriotism. By this I do not mean nationalism; in fact, a believable form of

patriotism that the centre-left could adopt could never be truly nationalistic. Instead of fighting the Englishman's devotion to their country, the centre-left should be giving forth compelling reasons why it shares that viewpoint.

England (and indeed, all of Britain, but let us stick to England for the moment) has much to be proud of from a centre-left perspective. It is a nation that was ahead of the curve in terms of outlawing slavery in 1808; it stood up to Nazism in the second World War despite the short term deleterious effects of this on Britain (and particularly England); the introduction of the National Health Service in the 1940s despite the country being in a parlous economic state created a national treasure valued by people across the political spectrum. There is much to feel proud of while being English and of the centre-left simultaneously, however much those feelings might be raw in the aftermath of the EU referendum result.

In terms of practicalities, the United Kingdom has a quasi-federal system already. The centre-left should complete the task Labour began in the 1990s. There are constitutional issues around creating another parliament, of course, and there are two basic routes through this should an English parliament come to fruition. Either the House of Commons becomes simply the place where certain key policy areas continue to be developed and made law – national security, foreign policy overall, one-off issues that specifically cross the borders of the individual nations – or the House of Commons is phased out over an extended period of time with the idea that everything will eventually become the preserve of the devolved parliaments, including national defence and foreign policy issues. Very possibly, this will be something that cannot be predicted ahead of time in terms of how this will progress.

When Jeremy Corbyn first became leader of the Labour Party there was a famous occasion upon which he would not sing the national anthem. Afterwards when heavily questioned about this, the leader of the opposition and those in his inner circle fudged the answers (memorably, John McDonnell claimed that Corbyn was so moved by the occasion he couldn't

recall the words to the song). A greater demonstration of the problems the British Left has with patriotism you will not find. It could have been an opportunity to say something like:

“As a life-long republican, I refuse to sing a song dedicated to the upkeep of the monarchy. I also think that if Scotland and Wales each get their own national anthems, I don’t see why England doesn’t get its own as well. I think it should be “Jerusalem” but it should be for the English people as a whole to decide.”

Had a Labour leader said this in the autumn of 2015, we might all be in a different place right now.

The centre-left has shied for too long away from questions of patriotism. It must stop this trend if it wishes to win another general election. This is why a flagship policy for any centre-left government should be the establishment of an English parliament, to be set in either Birmingham, Manchester, or another English city that is not London.

5. THE SCOTTISH QUESTION

From the 1964 general election until the Scottish Independence referendum fifty years later, to say that the Labour Party was the dominant force in Scottish politics would be a massive understatement. During the first thirty years of this period, the Tories managed to hang on to a respectable yet diminishing pool of support in Scotland. But in 1987, the number of Scottish Conservative MPs was halved; by the time 1997 rolled around, the Tories were left with no seats in Scotland at all.

1992 was the last general election that the Tories finished second in terms of the popular vote in Scotland. 1997 was the last general election where they managed as high as third – until 2015 brought the collapse of the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives picked up third place again by default. The destruction of the Scottish Conservatives meant that Labour only had to fight against a relatively small band of Lib Dems and Nationalists for a decade and a half.

The scale of their control over Scottish politics made Labour presumptive in regards to the Celtic nation. It became assumed that the Scots would vote for Labour forever via lack of any meaningful alternative. It was this attitude that led to the SNP Westminster landslide in the 2015 general election. It had very little to do with perceptions of Labour on a left-right axis; the Scots were tired of being taken for granted, and the independence referendum allowed the Nats the chance to reach out to voters they hadn't been able to previously, giving them the extra boost that satisfactory feelings from their performance in government in Scotland had already engendered.

In the 2015 general election, Labour lost an incredible 40 seats to the Scottish National Party. Scottish politics, as a result, has changed - irrevocably. In 2016, Scotland voted 62-38 to remain in the EU, while England voted 53-47 to leave. All this does not mean that a split with the

rest of the Union (and thus the future of the Union itself being imperilled) is inevitable. But in the wake of the EU referendum result, the demise of the Union looks more likely than ever before.

Steps need to be taken to try and avoid this, if possible. If the centre-left is willing to embrace a fully federalised system and the politics that comes with that, it can play a role. An English parliament, as described in the previous chapter, is step one of that. Step two is accepting the current state of Scottish politics and then working within that new reality.

What Labour (and particularly Scottish Labour) need to accept is that rebuilding the party back to the way it was pre-2011 in Scotland is very likely impossible. Qualitative research suggests that anger at Labour over what happened during the independence referendum build up has subsided, only to be replaced by a feeling that Labour is something that belongs to the past⁴. Beyond that, Scottish Labour lacks the activists to rebuild on a massive scale. One of the reasons for the size of the 2015 general election defeat in Scotland for Labour was that the SNP had the foot soldiers. In some constituencies that were considered safe Labour seats pre-2015, there barely existed a Labour Party in anything other than name.

With Labour out of the picture and the Lib Dems crushed in Scotland as well, increasingly there is room for one Nationalist party and only one Unionist party. Such is the pull of the independence question on all aspects of Scottish politics. Under Ruth Davidson the Tories have shown that they aren't as toxic as once they feared they would be for the rest of time. But coming second in the Scottish parliamentary elections in 2016 had more to do with the decline of Labour than a sudden rise of Scottish Toryism. The Scottish Conservatives would almost certainly become much larger and electorally successful were they to call themselves anything other than the Conservative Party. They should break off from the Westminster party, call themselves the Unionist Party, and forge their own path to electoral success

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4. www.quirkos.com/workshops/referendum/Qualitative-study-on-the-Scottish-Referendum--Quirkos-2015.pdf

– and keeping the Union together.

That is obviously a question for the centre-right. The centre-left should be neutral on the question of Scottish independence, only noting that the will of the people must be obeyed in Scotland. If Scotland becomes independent via a second referendum, then the creation of an English parliament shows that the centre-left is prepared for a post-Union world. If it remains in the Union either through the Nationalists losing a second independence referendum or that referendum somehow being avoided altogether, then the centre-left has already called for a more federalised structure, part of which should be devolving more and more powers to the Scottish parliament, Welsh Assembly, the parliament of Northern Ireland – and the English parliament.

In terms of how this will affect Westminster politics, the centre-left must demonstrate its newfound respect for the way Scottish politics have changed and simply seek to work with every party in Scotland as and when. When setting out a progressive programme of government, the English centre-left could challenge the SNP to vote aspects of it down or ask them to make it more progressive as the case may be. As power is devolved away from Westminster, this becomes less and less relevant as time goes on anyhow.

6. IN SUMMARY: A NEW PLEDGE CARD FOR 2016

One of the most ridiculed remnants of the Ed Miliband era was the infamous “Ed Stone”, in which six pledges were carved in a 2.6 metre tall slab of granite. Those pledges were vague and forgettable, and for the sake of the reading audience will not be repeated here.

Yet they were based on something that had previously worked very well, that being Labour’s 1997 general election pledge card. What would be the five things a newly reformed centre-left would pledge to do in 2016?

1. An end to austerity via large capital projects, particularly transportation infrastructure outside of London
2. An English parliament to settle the devolution project and the West Lothian question for good, to be set in an English city outside of London
3. No income tax rises on middle earners for the length of one parliament
4. A community banking structure to be established that will allow for more investment in small businesses and start ups
5. Britain to build the number of new homes it needs, with priority given to first time buyers

These pledges, while important, are simply the top level of what must be a whole reset of the way the centre-left does things. A party of the centre-left – again, most likely Labour, given the history - needs to become big tent again for a start. The largest centre-left conglomeration cannot exclude social liberals as it has done over the past fifty years, allowing a third party to become large enough to become a coalition partner in a Conservative administration.

The challenge of getting a centre-left party back into government will be much more difficult than the same task which faced John Smith and then Tony Blair in the 1990s. Most parts of the big tent that Blair assembled in 1997 can no longer be simply taken for granted or relied upon to support the Labour Party no matter what. The election of Corbyn as leader of the party has exposed just how different the ideals of the far-left and the values and expectations of most centre-left voters are. If this gap cannot be bridged, then Labour is finished and a new party of the centre-left must – and will – emerge. Either that or the centre-left will fade away as a mainstream ideology.

Now is a period of existential crisis for the British centre-left. Weather it correctly and it could become ascendant again. Go the wrong direction and the centre-right governs the country for the next two decades at least. It is up to the leaders of the centre-left to decide which road it goes down next.

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