Neoliberalism, Democracy and the Environment: false dawns and achievable tomorrows for a new British Left

Noel Castree

Introduction

This essay's principal argument is that the 'environmental agenda' – or what some, like campaign journalist George Monbiot, more assertively term the 'environmental crisis' – ought to be a prime vehicle for moving British society in a more progressive direction yet is currently failing to realise its considerable political potential. My objectives are to explain this troubling situation and to consider what might realistically be done to change it.

In what follows I take three things as read. The first is that British society has embraced a neoliberal version of capitalism for almost thirty years. The second is that while British democracy may be preferable to, say, Zimbabwe's, Russia's or Iran's, it barely corresponds to the classic democratic principle 'government by the people for the people'. There is a democratic deficit to be

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made good on. The third is that 'the Left' – by which I mean all those progressives who think New Labour too neoliberal by half – is currently piece-meal and divided. Not only does it lack a recognised political party to give it voice and recognition in the public sphere; it is also splintered philosophically and organisationally into numerous fractions and factions. In light of these claims, some important questions arise. How can British society be weened-off the deadly solicitations of neoliberalism? How can its democratic institutions – flawed though they are – be used to precipitate the 'long revolution' that is required? And how can a more coherent Left be created that's capable of making its project and policies a new common-sense within a generation?

While I cannot provide comprehensive answers to such large questions, I do think environmental issues are key ingredients in all three cases. The years 2005 and 2006 may, with hindsight, be considered pivotal ones for all those with 'green' sensibilities. They marked a sudden (and in many ways unexpected) return of environmental issues to the top of the agenda for the UK government, the British public and not a few businesses. Not since the salad days of the early 1970s – when *The Ecologist* magazine was established, when *Limits to Growth* was published, when Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth were founded, and when the first intergovernmental conference on the environment took place – have environmental issues featured so prominently

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in the collective discourse of Britons (or at least its chattering classes). As I write, these issues remain front-and-centre in national debate and may, with luck, become an enduring concern for the governing and the governed – rather than slowly fading into the background, as happened thirty years ago.

Suitably 'framed', I believe that environmental issues are an important vehicle for moving towards a post-neoliberal Britain and towards a renewed, more unified Left able to alter the terms of national debate. But realising this 'green potential' will by no means be easy. As I will explain, some formidable barriers threaten to stymie this potential indefinitely, and some bold strategic changes to Left thought and organisation will be required. Paraphrasing Gramsci, the old may be dying but the new will not come into existence without guile and effort on the part of its proponents, plus some luck. Even so, I want to insist on the historic opportunity that environmental issues hold-out for progressive change in British society – not exclusively, to be sure, but as part of a wider project.

Neoliberal Britain

As many commentators have observed, the New Labour project has been neoliberal to the marrow. Blair and (to the immense disappointment of his

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supporters) his successor Gordon Brown have operated within the political economic and cultural parameters established by the Conservative governments of the Thatcher-Major years. The 'Third Way' has, in essence, been neoliberalism with a human face. The core features of the neoliberal project have all been promoted or, if not, at least respected. New Labour has been committed to extending the reach of the market, to minimising state 'interference' in economic affairs, to making remaining state functions as market-like as possible, to encouraging the growth of 'flanking organisations' in civil society, and to engendering an ethic of self-sufficiency over against an ethic of solidarity. In his authoritative analysis, the neo-Marxist Andrew Glyn (2006) regards neoliberalism as 'capitalism unleashed' – and so it is in its pure form. But Blair, with the 'old Labour' figure of Brown counter-balancing him as Chancellor, intentionally softened its harder edges by offering child tax credits, putting record investment in the National Health Service, instituting Sure Start and the minimum wage, and presenting a raft of other measures designed to suggest that while 'new' he was still nonetheless recognisably Labour.

Over a decade after Blair first entered number 10 Downing Street, the wheels of the New Labour bandwagon seem to have fallen-off. The new Prime Minister has proven himself to be an ineffective leader, and is as unpopular in his way as Blair was at the end of his premiership – perhaps even more so.

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Those on the Left who expected Brown to define a new agenda for Labour and the country – like the Compass group – have been exasperated by his serial equivocation and blundering. Brown had a chance to distance himself from (or draw a line under) some of the previous incumbent's policies – notably the Iraq invasion – and to set-out clearly his own conception of a better Britain. But his message, like his actions, has been contradictory and out-of-focus so far as his own party and the public are concerned. As one well-known *Guardian* columnist recently put it, '...those of us who hoped that the man had hidden depths have had to conclude that he's a man of hidden shallows. ... [O]n the whole, we're not impressed' [1]. In mid-April 2008 even figures as senior as the Chancellor (Alistair Darling) and foreign Secretary (David Miliband) were forced to concede on record that the government needed to define its message much more sharply and communicate it more effectively to the country.

In an era of image-politics, Brown's uncharismatic leadership – when compared to Blair at his compelling best – has contributed significantly to his currently low poll ratings. Unlike Blair, he has no senior Cabinet figure who is popular within the Labour Party or the country – leaving him exposed in a

1 J. Russell (2008) 'This man of hidden shallows is alienating millions of voters', *The Guardian*, April 16 p. 29.

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world where personality counts for so much. In addition, major problems occurring under his watch have badly dented Brown's authority – notably, the Northern Rock fiasco, the wider 'credit crunch' and their fall-out in terms of house-price declines and a tightening mortgage market. Avoidable errors – like the late 2007 confusion over whether Brown would call an early general election – have not helped matters. The government seems to be drifting without a compass, something a thrice-elected administration cannot afford to do lest voter ennui exacts its revenge at the ballot box. A week may be a long time in politics, but as I write these words (early-2009) it seems very possible that Cameron's Conservatives will win the next general election, with the Liberal Democrats faring well if youthful new leader Nick Clegg can assert his authority within his party and win-over enough disenchanted New Labour voters.

Progressive who are left of New Labour ought to be ambivalent about this state of affairs. On the one hand they can feel vindicated: despite its best (some would say token) efforts, New Labour has ultimately been unable to tame the excesses of neoliberal capitalism at home. Several studies by governmental and non-governmental bodies reveal record levels of income inequality, no relative increase in people's sense of well-being, unprecedented numbers of mentally ill, depressed and imprisoned individuals, and a near-obsessive quest by all social groups to keep-up-with-the-Joneses. On the other

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hand, the fact that the Tories will probably assume power in the next eighteen months is clearly a cause for great concern. Cameron – to the extent that his major policy reviews have thus far yielded a coherent political programme – will undoubtedly accept the terms and conditions of the neoliberal compact, just as Blair did as Prime Minister and his former Chancellor has done. There will be no paradigm-shift in the political- economic or cultural senses. Consequently, British society is likely to get more of the same from its political leaders for several years to come, albeit under a different party-banner and the aegis of a different Prime Minister.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. In his classic analysis of British economy and society during the long era of 'liberal capitalism', Karl Polanyi [2] showed why the so-called 'free market' is ultimately destructive of the very things upon which its survival depends. Nearly a century after that era came crashing to an end with the Great Depression and the second world war, it is worth considering the contemporary relevance of two of Polanyi's key ideas. The first is the concept of a 'fictitious' or 'pseudo-commodity'. This refers to any good whose social value or ecological functions cannot be fully captured by their market price. The fictitious commodities that preoccupied Polanyi were human beings (as wage labourers) and the biophysical world (as both a source

[2] K. Polanyi (1944) *The great transformation*, Boston: Beacon Books.

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of raw materials and a sink for waste products). The second concept is that of the 'double movement'. Efforts to extend the frontiers of the market, so Polanyi showed, led in Victorian Britain to concerted resistance as society sought to save itself (and the natural environment) from the excesses of *laissez faire*.

If Polanyi's historical analysis has any predictive value, then we might expect to see three things today. The first is a raft of social and environmental problems attendant upon neoliberalism's exposure of fictitious commodities to the full force of market rationality. The second is the politicization of these problems by progressive forces determined to reverse the gains that neoliberals have made this last thirty years. The third is the creation by these forces of a new common sense and, indeed, a new socio-environmental reality as they assume power over the long-term. It seems to me that while the first of these has come to pass, we clearly have some way to go until the second and especially the third eventuate. This suggests either that the parallels between classical liberalism and neoliberalism in Britain are weak, or that more time and work are required for a present-day double movement to become evident. Despite the manifest differences between Victorian capitalism and early twenty first century neoliberalism, I believe that Polanyi's analysis has contemporary relevance. As I see it, we are at the start of a by no means inevitable shift away from neoliberalism in Britain. As I will now explain, the

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recent resurgence of environmental concern is a harbinger in this regard. But it will only feed into a wider post-neoliberal Left project if a formidable number of challenges and objectives are met.

The environmental wedge

The years 2005 and 2006 saw the unexpected rise of environmental issues to the top of political, public and even business agendas. I say unexpected not because these issues were heretofore marginal – on the contrary, they had enjoyed a certain visibility since the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro re-established their global importance after a decade in which Thatcher, Reagan and others had put them firmly on the back-burner. What happened in 2005/6 was a sudden spike in environmental concern, one that Polly Toynbee [3] felt might be 'a psychological tipping point'. In part, this arose because the widely reported Stern Review combined environmental science with environmental economics to deliver a clear message about the need for significant change in the way we use the non-human world. Political leaders suddenly (belatedly) realised that the environmental agenda was both

[3] P. Toynbee (2005) 'Which would Blair prefer – an ID card or a windmill?', *The Guardian*, June 29 p. 22.

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intrinsically important and a potential vote winner. The new Conservative leader staged an early photo-opportunity on a melting Greenland glacier; the then Chancellor Gordon Brown delivered more than one keynote speech about climate change; and Tony Blair very publicly made this same issue central to his efforts in the European Union and the annual G8 summit. In the wider world it was the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and former US vice-president Al Gore who were making the political weather for these and other party politicians. Both received the Nobel Peace Prize for their persistent attempts to alert humanity to the likely effects of greenhouse gas emissions. In the worlds of journalism and writing environmental issues enjoyed a prominence not seen for thirty years. Broadsheet newspapers devoted more column-inches than ever to environmental problems, and television stations broadcast an unprecedented number of documentaries and news stories about the same issues. Meanwhile, authors like George Monbiot, Jonathan Porritt, Fred Pearce, Mark Lynas, and Colin Tudge found ready audiences for their amber- and red-alert books on environmental matters. So too the likes of Richard Mabey and Robert Macfarlane, both wordsmiths of elegy and nature-therapy.

Though it's too soon to tell, the environmental spike of the mid-noughties may well have morphed into a new plateau of concern in British society. Aside from the credit crunch and its ramified effects, the major domestic issues of 2008

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have been environment-related ones, such as rising food prices, rising oil (and thus fuel) prices, renewable energy, the possible return of nuclear power, Britain's apparent failure to meet its Kyoto commitments, the meaning of sustainable consumption, energy security, and the relative contribution to atmospheric pollution of plane, water and terrestrial travel. These and other environmental challenges are not, of course, the result of neoliberal policies alone. In my view, and more fundamentally, most of them ultimately arise from the dysfunctions constitutive of that capitalist system which, for the last thirty years, has assumed a particular (neoliberal) form within these shores and which has existed (on a progressively larger and now truly global scale) for over two centuries. This system's signature characteristic is, of course, the relentless commitment to economic growth – a commitment which, to date, has been enormously materials- and energy-intensive. Few in the political mainstream are prepared to name 'capitalism' as the problem – it sounds too abstract and grand (even for the otherwise cerebral Brown). Only green activists and lobbyists like Porritt [4] – author of *Capitalism as if the world matters* (2005) – are willing use the term unapologetically in place of euphemisms and red-herrings like 'industrialism', 'technology', 'consumerism' and 'over-population'. This is a pity, because this term directs our attention to the *systemic* nature of environmental problems. In neoliberal regimes, like

[4] J. Porritt (2005) *Capitalism as if the world matters*, London: Earthscan.

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Britain's, these problems have intensified because *laissez faire* policies treat the non-human world like a 'normal' commodity when it is, in fact, a source of material, moral and spiritual values that can never be properly represented by pounds and pence. Nonetheless, people outside the British environmental movement do at least recognise that there is a 'problem' – or a rather a family of problems – and that something non-trivial needs to be done to address them. The question is: how do they frame these problems and, thereby, define the field of possible solutions?

Politicising environmental issues

'Real' environmentalists – that is, those seeking a step-change in how we engage with the non-human world and, by implication, how we relate to each other – are accustomed to false dawns. Seasoned campaigners and commentators, like Monbiot (agitating as a 'outsider') and Porritt (now operating as an 'insider'), may well be encouraged by the recent outpouring of environmental concern but know there is a very long way to go – and for good reason. Mainstream politicians, committed to the continuation of neoliberalism, make rhetorically strong claims about the need for action but, in practice, prefer their environmentalism to be 'lite' rather than strong. Business interests variously resist the environmental challenge altogether

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(witness British Petroleum's sharp move away from its previous 'beyond petroleum' strategy), favour low-octane market-led regulation, or parade their green credentials only as a public relations ploy. Genuine corporate enthusiasm seems only to be displayed by those firms who can see real profits from 'going green' – like wind turbine companies, carbon-offset brokerages or supermarkets selling organics. Meanwhile, the average British citizen is enjoined to spend their hard-earned income in 'ecofriendly' ways, even as they are simultaneously encouraged to holiday abroad, consume ever more imported commodities, and aspire to the lifestyles of the rich-and-famous.

In short, what had become true of British (indeed Western) environmentalism by the 1990s remains true today: it has been mainstreamed. Intellectually, the radical arguments from the 1970s about the need for major change resonate once more post successive IPCC reports, Stern and all the rest. But, in real terms, these translate into problem-and-solution framing that is 'technocentrist' and thoroughly neoliberal. A combination of profit-making 'clean technology' and market-disciplined human behaviour will, so our political masters believe, make 'sustainable development' a reality. New Labour, like its political opponents, is most comfortable with 'free market environmentalism' as the solution to the environmental problems that 'the market' – that is to say, neoliberal capitalism – has created in the first place. This is why, instead of tough command-and-control regulation, one sees

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government favouring ecotaxes, pollution abatement markets, voluntary codes for corporate good practice and ethical consumption as the ways forward. Evidently, Adam Smith's fabled 'hidden hand' is presumed to have a green thumb that will deliver the necessary change for Britain and the world.

However, things are not all bad. In the first place, there is now a powerful sense in Britain that a range of environmental issues are *real*, not to be dismissed as the fantasies of a few tousle-haired radicals and dope-smoking hippies. Second, there seems – at long last – to be a widespread recognition that 'the environment' is not a 'special interest' issue. John Muir once memorably observed that 'When we try to pick-out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe'. This sense that we live in an implicate order – that 'the environment' is, in fact, central to *everything* we do (work, leisure, love ...) – seems genuinely to have struck home. Relatedly, there appears to be an equally clear recognition that 'the environment' is not simply (or only) a question of disappearing bird species, National Parks, flood management, and the green belt. One example is the current country-wide preoccupation with food which, when it isn't demonising those with eating disorders, has usefully made visible the normally hidden chain of connections between field and plate, household and hinterland. We've come to understand that 'environmental issues' are issues for *all* of us such are their breadth and diversity, and are as much urban as rural in nature.

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In the fourth place there is also now a fairly widespread recognition that environmental issues have a certain 'leakiness' in the spatio-temporal sense. Even though all these issues have an insistently local aspect – think, for instance, of the ecologies and communities that will be negatively affected if Heathrow gets a new runway – they also, it is now widely understood, have a transnational dimension too. Our ostensibly place-specific practices in and on nature can have a global, non-immediate effect. As such they are about elsewhere and the future, about distant others and our own children. In the fifth place, if less emphatically, the recent wave of environmental concern in Britain has registered the social justice and social welfare aspects of the environmental agenda. This is an important development (evident, for example, in consumers' willingness to pay for Fair Trade coffee and tea) because it challenges the stereotype that 'environmentalists' are only interested in nature's welfare not that of people (even though it's true that a smattering of hard-core environmentalists are thoroughly misanthropic). Finally, there seems now to be a recognition that the environment, regardless of one's income, occupation and place of residence, is a 'quality of life' issue central to our physical and emotional well-being – not something only middle-class ramblers ought to worry about. This insight is consonant with the recent writings of Richard Layard, Kate Soper and Wendy Wheeler, among others.

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Agents of change

Environmental issues, I am arguing, have been (re)politicised in Britain in ways at once depressing and encouraging for those who are well to the left of the political, corporate and public mainstream. How, then, to use the environmental agenda as a vehicle for progressive and radical change in Britain? Who will be driving this agenda forward, and to what ends? Let me take these critical questions in reverse order, and in answering them explore what a new British left and a new kind of democracy might look like.

First, then, who are the likely agents of progressive change in Britain? Though the values and practices of neoliberalism are hegemonic (even after the considerable financial market turmoil evident since summer 2007), they are not universally admired. There is plenty of discontent out there – in households, workplaces, pressure groups, non-governmental organisations, think-tanks, charities, small political parties, trade unions and new social movements – and much of it is politically to the left. There is also a desire to be heard and a willingness to take-action. Over the last decade, we have seen many inspiring examples of this, from the formation of Neal Lawson's Compass group (founded once it became clear that New Labour was really Thatcherism in sheep's clothing) to direct action campaigns like Camp for Climate Action to the anti-war marches of the new millennium. Some of the

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agitation works gently but persistently 'inside' the neoliberal project (such as Porritt's Forum for the Future), and some of it uncompromisingly on the 'outside' (such as the successive anti-road protests symbolised some years ago by 'Swampy'). Some of it seeks influence through the media, some if it through the electoral process, and some it through direct engagement with Westminster and the business world. It's positively a jamboree of ideas and activities.

There is, then, still a thing called 'the Left' in Britain – despite many commentators suggesting it's gone the way of the dodo. The problem, though, as I indicated earlier, is that it's intellectually and organisationally fragmented. It does not recognise itself as a movement with a programme because it's currently comprised of myriad constituencies with their own agendas. The British Left thus exists but not, as it were, for itself. As such it's currently not fit for purpose. This, I think, is what David Aaronovich [5] meant when he said 'it's become very hard to know what the Left now is or what it's for'. The 'old' British Left – namely, the labour movement (represented by the trades unions and, further to the Left, the British Communist and Socialist Workers parties) – has all but disappeared. What's now needed is a grand coalition that brings the three main elements of the current non-mainstream British Left together:

[5] D. Aaronovich (2003) 'Our two wise men', *The Observer*, November 2nd p. 28.

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namely, the social, cultural and environmental elements. Rather as it did in the late nineteenth century, the Left has to build itself anew – to begin from scratch. It must be aspirational, confident yet also realistic, trimming its sails to suit the prevailing political weather even as it charts new waters over time. Only on this basis can a new British Left be founded capable of exerting long-term influence in the national arena. The alternative – which is to continue on with a divided Left – amounts to a decision to let others govern this country indefinitely. Ben Little's[6] recent suggestion that single issue politics will deliver most of the Left's collective aims strikes me as totally wrong-headed.

The social Left is still represented, for the most part, by a reconstituted trade union movement, supplemented by a raft of bodies concerned with welfare issues (like Shelter and The Big Issue). With a membership no longer comprising white males in manufacturing and heavy industry, the trade unions now represent an increasingly service-based, bi-gender, multi-ethnic, multi-sexual, and immigrant workforce. They still pay great attention to classic labour issues, such as fair pay, workplace rights, and all the rest. But they do so in a way that's sensitive to their members' diverse needs and wants.

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6 B. Little (2007) 'Politics without the Left (or Right)', http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings.cultures_capitalism. Accessed 25 March 2008.

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The cultural Left, by contrast, is far more fragmented. Never formally linked to Labour or any other political party (except, perhaps, for parts of its feminist arm), its many constituent elements emerged to push forward identity- and issue-specific agendas from the mid-1970s. Think of Stonewall, among many other examples. Finally, the environmental Left burst into life during the early 70s and today enjoys a 'thick' institutional presence and fairly large membership courtesy of Greenpeace UK, Friends of the Earth UK, and the British Green Party (among many other organisations).

How can a whole greater than the sum of the parts emerge from all this? 'With difficulty' is my immediate answer, but let me try to be positive. Despite their (undeserved) reputation as 'single issue' outfits, most Left-wing environmental organisations in this country fully understand the human dimensions of the green agenda. For instance, if one looks at its current manifesto, the UK Green Party is less an 'environmental' organisation and more a social justice party which treats environmental issues with the seriousness they deserve. The same joined-up politics can be found in Derek Wall's recent writings. Indeed, it seems to me that the green Left in Britain is philosophically well-placed to connect with other Left constituencies, even if many of the latter are only just waking up to the full importance of the environmental agenda. It's strange that so many on the wider Left have for so long seen the greens as a community unto themselves rather than members of

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an extended political family. This said, if we look at the social Left there are also some hopeful signs. While it's true that the trade unions have never had much to say about environmental issues, their newly diverse membership offers far greater potential for them to connect with the agendas of the cultural Left than an older white working class membership ever did. What's more, there is evidence that union leaders have given up on New Labour after suffering over a decade of arms-length treatment even as their members pour millions into the Party's coffers.

Organisationally, five crucial things are required. First, a new political party should be formed without delay. As the fortunes of Galloway's Respect coalition proves, it is very difficult for any new party to break the strangehold that the big three have on British politics. Even after thirty years, the UK Green Party has barely registered in local, national and European elections. However, the Green Party has a relatively stable membership, considerable campaign experience, and an income stream. Building on this, it ought to dissolve itself and join with willing partners from the social and cultural Lefts. Though this risks alienating many party activists and members, most UK Greens could be persuaded that their fundamental aims are not inconsistent with a wider Left project focussed on workplace (class), household (reproductive) and cultural (identity) issues – not least because it would make them far more electable. The conceptual glue that could make this project

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coherent might be the complimentary notions of 'livelihoods' and 'lifestyles' which together cross-cut economic, environmental and cultural issues, and which sound suitably '21st century'. Secondly, in the absence of public funding for political parties, the new party would need an income stream from some combination of the trade unions (who would disassociate from New Labour) and the larger NGOs. Otherwise it will be too resource poor to be effective.

Thirdly, it ought to chose a name judiciously, avoiding the apparent narrowness of a term like 'green', and an older language of 'socialism' (with all its baggage).The word 'Left' should also not feature in the party's name, even if it drives its politics – too many Brits regard it as a threatening or out-dated term. The New Democratic Party might be a candidate. In the fourth place, the new party would need one leader (not two 'spokespeople' as the Green Party had for a while) and a charismatic, probably youthful one at that – someone with the appeal of Bill Clinton and Blair in their political primes. As Brown is finding to his cost, image matters immensely in politics regardless of the political message leaders seek to convey. The new party would need an articulate, well-heeled person to lead the charge, but one that the public, as much as party members, could relate to and believe in. Someone like George Monbiot might be suitable, if he could unlearn his confrontational style and appear principled yet still conciliatory when necessary. Alternatively, if an emerging figure can be prized away from New Labour (like John Cruddas)

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there is potential to garner broad support. Currently, the non-parliamentary Left has no well recognised individuals except for Galloway and Ken Livingstone, both of whom have controversial pasts. It is a travesty that someone like BNP leader Nick Griffin is better known than virtually anyone within the cultural and green lefts. Finally, the new party would have to ensure that revolutionary, khaki-wearing, militant types remain firmly on the outside, yet without ignoring them altogether. The value of critics sniping from the margins is that it would keep the party honest and encourage out-of-the-box thinking. However, in the current political climate bringing figures as radical today as the likes of Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill were in the 80s into any new party would make it unelectable from the start.

So much for organisational matters. What of intellectual ones? This is not the place to detail a manifesto for a new British Left, but some general comments about a political programme are in order. Philosophically, such a big tent Left would be clearly *against* neoliberalism and transparently *for* a set of strong countervailing values and objectives. It would be against neoliberalism on the grounds that it has widened social inequality in Britain, attenuated any deep sense of fraternity within the national population, atomised individuals and communities, eviscerated public services to the detriment of the least well-off, and inflicted damage on the national and global environment that could prove disastrous at home and abroad. It would be for social equality of opportunity

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for all Britons; for the social regulation of business in the interests of workers, families and the environment; for a fair tax system whose resources sustain expanded, high quality public service provision; for individual and group liberties but always tempered by a concern for the common good, and especially the well-being of society's least fortunate members; for an ethic of shared responsibility and concern about what happens within these shores, even as respect for cultural differences between communities-of-identity is engendered; and it would be for a broad conception of 'the good life' that included but extended well beyond considerations of income and material gain to consider cultural and environmental matters. In sum, it would be for systemic change in British society – envisaged as taking place over a 30 year period. The party, like the broad Left it represents, would have to live with capitalism, but it would certainly have no truck with the excesses of its neoliberal version. It would begin, in practical terms, with small but symbolically important changes and build, through 2-3 electoral cycles, towards deeper transformations (what US Marxist Erik Olin Wright calls 'a real utopia').

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Gaining influence by remaking democracy

Of course, none of the above would count for anything unless a new British Left could make itself popular. I say popular because Britain is that rare thing in this troubled world: a stable, if highly imperfect, democracy. There is (and should always be) only one way to gain political power here, and that is by winning the argument so that voters elect you to office. A new historic bloc in the Gramscian sense is the only way forward; there is no prospect of garden-variety coups occurring, or militancy succeeding, in Britain. New Labour has made some moves to democratise decision-making since it first came to office (such as the Scottish and Welsh assemblies, and the creation of the London mayoralty), but in other respects remains content with the highly undemocratic system it inherited (with its enormous centralisation of executive power, numerous quangos, and hugely unrepresentative voting system). Its current attempts at constitutional reform are hardly radical, and may well amount to nothing in any case. To a considerable extent this shields government from feeling the full force of discontent in the country as a whole, in its left and right versions. Indeed, the shocking concentration of political power in Britain is precisely what has allowed successive post-79 governments to deliver a neoliberal revolution with only a few serious set-backs. Proportional representation and a new written constitution based on the principle of shared (or dispersed power) would radically reconfigure the

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national political landscape, and permit new voices to be heard and new parties to wield real influence. However, since neither of these are in the offing, a new British Left must reckon with the realities of our less-than-perfect democratic system in the here and now.

Ours is an electoral democracy and, with 60 million of us inhabiting the same territory, a mass one at that. The closest British adults ever get to politics is when they cast their ballots. And not many of them do that anymore, as progressively declining turnouts in local, national and European elections attest. But British democracy – like all democracies – is not synonymous with the political apparatus alone (elections, MPs, local councillors, select committees, cabinet ministers, and all the rest). Instead, as all political theorists know, it is much wider than this. It encompasses a notionally 'free' media, a civil society (or public sphere) where free speech is a cardinal principle, the right of citizens to assemble and organize politically, and the rule of law. It could be wider still if the idea of economic democracy had any traction in Britain (which it doesn't). In this broad sense, the non-New Labour left (as it is and could be) should continue to believe in the power of democracy, both as a normative ideal and even in its currently imperfect actually-existing state. No better system of rule has ever been conceived of, and for all its faults British democracy is manifestly superior to that found in places like Italy and Russia, let alone Pakistan, Kenya or Uzbekistan. But it is

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precisely because of our system's unrealised potential – the gap between ideals and realities – that many leading left commentators have spent a good deal of time considering how to unlock it. Take *The Guardian*, for instance, where the likes of Jonathan Friedland, John Kampfner, Tim Garton Ash, Martin Jacques and Polly Toynbee have in recent years devoted endless column inches to the question of British democracy. If, like them, we ponder the wider failings of our democratic system we can see just how formidable the barriers to be encountered by any new British Left really are. I discuss these barriers in no particular order.

First, notwithstanding the current economic travails, neoliberalism has 'delivered the goods' – or, rather, one definition of 'the goods' – to a large number of Britons. The country remains ostensibly wealthy after a decade-plus boom, with many people able to afford more consumer items and holidays than ever before – even if many still can't afford to buy a house or clear their mounting credit cards bills. In this sense, economics has displaced politics in British society: consumerism and the long-hours culture that underpins it have inured many people to the fact that working and spending are politics by other means. So long as they can afford to drink coffee at Starbucks, take their children to Pizza Express, fly to the Med and buy the latest wide-screen TV people appear happy enough to accept the status quo. Any successor project to British neoliberalism would have to tread carefully

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around economic issues, and it would certainly have to persuade voters that national 'growth' can be sustained albeit in a far less materials-intensive way. (The notion of a 'steady state' economy, of which I thoroughly approve, is currently just too radical for many voters to buy into – and, in any case, is incompatible with capitalism).

Second, and relatedly, the neoliberal ethic of individualism has penetrated deep into the British psyche. Although many Welsh and Scottish share a strong sense of nationality, these days most Brits have a very thin or non-existent sense of belonging and solidarity with others. Unsurprisingly, many recent immigrants do exhibit strong group commitments, but the host population often feels anxious about their presence, further weakening any national, cross-group sense of identity and togetherness. The often heated debates about Muslims in Britain, about asylum seekers, about the 'proper' number of immigrants, and about the 'failures' of multiculturalism all bespeak a country lacking in what social policy guru Robert Putnam[7] calls 'bridging capital'. This is the difficult background against which any new Left project to de-neoliberalise Britain would somehow have to unfold. As a nation, we lack the ethnic homogeneity and 'thick' social commitments of, say, the Scandanavian democracies and this poses a governance problem for future

[7] R. Putnam (2000) *Bowling* alone, New York: Simon & Schuster.

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administrations intent on making social justice and environmental stewardship a key part of their platform. In Polanyi's terms, we have become a 'market society' fitted to a market economy.

Third, there has been a long-run loss of faith in the formal political process. This is not just because of the centralisation of power already mentioned – whose most egregious abuse was the decision, in the teeth of intense public opposition, to wage war in Iraq. It is also because of serial scandals and mishaps in Westminster, such as the David Kelly affair, the BAE systems bribery cover-up and the misuse by some MPs of their allowances. Where once politicians were deemed to be responsible and honourable they are now generally regarded as sleazy, self-serving and on-the-make. Given this, a new British Left party would have to claim the moral high ground and occupy it through example, patiently dispelling public disbelief in the good intentions of elected representatives. Any leader of such a party would need a squeekily 'clean' record.

A fourth barrier to progressive change is the world of info- and entertainment. When not working, studying and socialising, the average Briton spends virtually no time considering political issues and an awful lot of time playing computer games, going to the cinema, watching DVDs or viewing reality-TV shows. Relatedly, serious news reporting only appeals to a small minority of

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the population if the audience figures for BBC News 24 are anything to go by, or the circulation figures for broadsheets versus tabloids are any indication. What's more, serious news outlets rarely seem willing to point beyond the existing state of things. For instance, *The Guardian* – still the country's most left-wing broadsheet – is very much a New Labour newspaper, one whose editorials occasionally scold the government but typically refrain from condemning it. Or consider news programmes on the five terrestrial TV channels: aside from the Iraq issue (where long term exit-strategies are now routinely discussed), the reporting is overwhelming mired in the immediacy and detail of 'the story'. Attempts to properly contextualise political issues and explore alternatives are seemingly out-of-court. All of this would not be so bad if the news media were not the primary source for most people's political information and insight. As with most contemporary capitalist states, the British news media do not innocently 'report' what happens in the 'first estate' – that is, the realm of party and parliamentary politics. To a large extent, they *occupy* this estate themselves, circumscribing public knowledge of politics at the level of facts, concepts and norms. There's no conspiracy here – contrary to the opinion of those who see Rupert Murdoch's hands hither-and-thither. It's just that the news media is umbilically tied to mainstream politics, a once following it and reproducing its unspoken assumptions about good and bad, right and wrong, realism and idealism.

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In the fifth place, all this has helped to weaken the British public sphere. True, there remains a highly literate and morally vexed fraction of the national population that takes politics very seriously. This fraction is divided between activists working for various political parties, NGOs, think-tanks etc., and those ordinary citizens who simply understand that politics cannot be left to the politicians alone. But, as David Marquand[8] narrates in his book *The decline of the public*, the sort of weekly agora that is BBC's Question Time, Any Questions and Any Answers programmes is now the exception that prove the rule. A few hundred thousand politically literate citizens will not be enough to bring a new Left party to power. What is needed is a way of reaching not only the lumpen electorate but, more particularly, that minority of voters in particular constituencies that can tip the results of any national ballot.

Finally, one of British neoliberalism's in-built immunities is its proposed solutions to the problems created by the apparent 'success' of the market rationality it embraces. On the social side, New Labour's rhetoric and practice of 'a hand-up not a hand-out' has, not surprisingly, won favour among all those who believe – in true neoliberal style – that they have earned their own rewards. On the environmental side, the faith in markets and technology

[8] D. Marquand (2004) *The decline of the public*, Cambridge: Polity.

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seems to be persuading many otherwise concerned citizens that the current regime can square the circle that is 'sustainable capitalist development'. So long as the poor and disadvantaged remain politically mute, and given how slowly many environmental problems become evident, there is a fair chance that both 'workfarism' and 'free market environment-alism' will remain popular for some time.

In light of these and other features of our actually-existing democracy, some have suggested that we now live in a 'post-democratic', 'post-political' era. This has been the catch-cry of continental Left philosophers like Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere and Slavoj Zizek, and the American critics Naomi Klein and Noreena Hertz. However, many on the British Left, within and without New Labour, still believe in the power and potential of democracy – one only has to look at the pages of the journals *Soundings* and *Renewals*, the recent Compass pamphlet 'Democracy and the public realm' (2007), The Power Inquiry Report (2006), or the efforts of The Campaign for Democracy (http://campaignfordemocracy.org.uk/) to appreciate that. This is the right attitude, so long as it's combined with realism about the challenges afoot and a determination to succeed over the long term (there will be no quick-fix).

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Conclusion

Only a crisis, Milton Friedman argued, can precipitate real change. At such moments apparently marginal or unfashionable ideas can fill the political-economic and cultural vacuum and fashion a new common-sense. Given time, they create the very standards by which they themselves are judged. The neoliberal revolution initiated by Thatcher is proof-positive of this, starting as it did in the ruins of a seemingly entrenched post-war Keynesian-welfarism that rapidly disintegrated. Thirty years on, is this another moment of crisis for British society? The current pincers movement of economic instability (triggered by reckless 'sub-prime' lending) and environmental anxiety suggest that the answer is 'perhaps'. But, even with conditions propitious to discrediting New Labour, the barriers to a new Left emerging are numerous, and there is also the considerable risk of the Conservatives (or a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition) gaining power and ploughing on with neoliberalism minus the New Labour tag-lines. While Cameron (and Clegg) would thereby prolong the crisis to their own parties' detriment, nothing good will come of it unless a credible progressive force is waiting in the wings.

I have argued that current environmental concern in the population at large, and the broad agenda of most card-carrying greens, together hold out

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considerable potential for both unifying and rendering popular a new British Left. There is, here, a very real intellectual and emotional basis for renewal. But I have also argued that for this potential to be realised there are serious intellectual, logistical and practical challenges to be faced. The easiest thing would be for a currently divided Left to continue with business-as-usual. The more difficult – but wholly necessary – thing would be to go boldly where the British Left hasn't gone for decades and start anew, building on what exists but transcending it to create a new project for the country as a whole. Feelbad Britain – to use a term that is the title of a new book authored by a range of British left thinkers (Devine et al, 2009) – desperately needs some new medicine lest its current ailments become chronic and incurable. Genuine Leftists need to become part of the solution or else, through their unwillingness to reconfigure their own fissiparous movement, they'll undoubtedly become culpable for the continuation of the problem. Let us take inspiration from anthropologist Margaret Mead and Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton[9], who reminds us political idealism is not synonymous with impossibilism: 'It's the hard-nosed pragmatists who behave as though the World Bank and café latte will be with us for the next two millennia who are

[9] T. Eagleton (2005) 'Just my imagination', *The Nation*, June 13 www.thenation.com/doc/20050613/eagleton. Accessed 12th October 2005.

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the real dreamers, and those who are open to the as yet unfigurable future who are the true realists'.

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