

telling it like it could be:

the moral force of
progressive politics

The Smith Institute

The Smith Institute is an independent think tank that has been set up to look at issues which flow from the changing relationship between social values and economic imperatives.

If you would like to know more about the Smith Institute please write to:

The Director
The Smith Institute
3rd Floor
52 Grosvenor Gardens
London
SW1W 0AW

Telephone +44 (0)20 7823 4240
Fax +44 (0)20 7823 4823
Email info@smith-institute.org.uk
Website www.smith-institute.org.uk

Designed and produced by Owen & Owen

telling it like it could be

2005

By Douglas Alexander MP



THE SMITH INSTITUTE

telling it like it could be:

the moral force of
progressive politics

By Douglas Alexander MP

Published by the Smith Institute

ISBN 1 902488 85 7

© The Smith Institute 2005

Contents

Preface	
By Wilf Stevenson, Director of the Smith Institute	3
Introduction: The moral force of progressive politics	4
Chapter 1: Lessons from history – the role of values in progressive politics	8
Chapter 2: Lessons from abroad – the role of values in recent elections	15
Chapter 3: Different countries, different challenges?	21
Chapter 4: Putting it into practice – three examples of progressive politics	33
Chapter 5: Revitalising the public realm – securing a new approach to politics	45
Conclusion: The challenges to progressive politics	51

Author's note

Douglas Alexander is Labour MP for Paisley South and minister for trade, investment and foreign affairs. He writes here in a personal capacity.

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of his researcher Stella Creasy in the preparation of this pamphlet and to thank the many friends and colleagues who provided invaluable help through their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts. In addition, he thanks the Smith Institute for its role in publishing this work.

Preface

Wilf Stevenson, Director of the Smith Institute

The Smith Institute is an independent think tank, which has been set up to undertake research and education in issues that flow from the changing relationship between social values and economic imperatives. In recent years the institute has centred its work on the policy implications arising from the interactions of equality, enterprise and equity.

Telling It Like It Could Be: The Moral Force of Progressive Politics is the first in a series of monographs that the Smith Institute has commissioned which deals with the implications of a politics based on shared moral sentiments. Over the past year, the Smith Institute has held a number of seminars and events covering issues which, their proponents claim, are rooted in the “common ground”. This has developed in tandem with a growing concern that the tribal politics of Westminster is becoming increasingly alien to the British public, whose trust of politicians is diminishing and for many of whom party loyalty is no longer the core component of political identity. Single-issue lobbies are attracting significant attention, while the offerings of the single-issue political parties are often supported beyond their reasonable expectations.

In this pamphlet, Douglas Alexander MP frames the centre left’s quest for progressive policies in terms of the current debate about how to build upon a “common sense” in which the British values of equality, solidarity and social justice prevail. In developing the argument for a politics based on shared principles, this essay also raises questions about how we could “do politics” in 21st century Britain.

Introduction: The moral force of progressive politics

During the past year a key question has dominated much debate among those of us in the Labour movement in the UK: how to build a progressive consensus among the British people – not just for progressive policies but for a “common sense” in which the values of equality, solidarity and social justice prevail. There is growing recognition that electoral success is a necessary but not sufficient condition of achieving such change. Its success depends on the ability of every generation of progressive politicians to reach out into British society and make the case not just for the policies, but also the politics and principles of social justice. The Labour movement was founded not to change governments but to change lives.

The need to build such a consensus in society is an integral part of Labour’s vision of the good society. This is a politics that thrives on securing the active support of citizens and withers without such consent. As Tawney once argued of progressive politics:¹

It must be related, not only to practical needs but to the mental and moral traditions of plain men and women, as history has fixed them. It must emphasise primarily what it has in common with their outlook, not the points at which it differs from them. It must not dogmatise or brow beat, but argue and persuade.

So, we must do more than assert the correctness of our politics; we must also find the language of persuasion to bring together people across British society to meet the common challenges of the age.

The familiar but diminishing traditional tribal loyalties of politics alone cannot achieve this goal. Support must be built within British society for our policies, and in turn we must find a way of talking about our shared sense of purpose, which can give meaning and motivation to participation. Yet securing this richer engagement by the public through participation and co-production cannot be legislated or demanded; it can only be learned through practice and habit. As progressive politicians, we must define explicitly the moral impulse that would underpin such a consensus. Without this, any coalition we could build within British society would be based on a passing recognition of common interests rather than a substantive shared sense of conviction about a set of common ideals. It is this moral impulse which has always been the “why” as well as “how” of the progressive

1 Tawney, RH *Equality* (HarperCollins, London, 1965)

political change we seek, acting as the guiding force for what we should do as a political movement.

My own background has inevitably shaped my thinking on this issue. My mother worked for 30 years in the NHS so, for me, the idea that there are values of care and concern that go far beyond contracts and exchange has long been one of my central beliefs. Both my parents' working lives manifested the belief that there is such a thing as society and that it is through our relationships with others that we find meaning and purpose in our lives beyond the trappings of wealth or power, success or prestige. Like many others, I was first drawn to the Labour movement by a recognition that it was a vehicle for the values – of solidarity, equality and indeed liberty – that we wished to characterise our society.

Yet many politicians have retreated from debates that acknowledge an explicitly moral dimension to public life for fear that this will be seen as simply moralising. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has argued² that this absence of moral reasoning has led to a situation in which "I ought" has been replaced in public discussions and debates with "I want". Indeed, he has warned that "obligations can be debated. Wants, choices and feelings can only be satisfied or frustrated." While such religious leaders have argued the imperative of such a conversation, it has proved a considerable challenge to achieve in an age of multiple cultures, world-views and ideological perspectives.

Difficult though it may seem to achieve in the current political climate, our progressive vision of the good society involves not just the courting and counting of votes, but a thriving civic culture of equal dignity and mutual responsibility in which every member of society feels able to contribute. Here, progressive politics draws on the capacity of what John Rawls identifies as "public reason"³ – the process by which every citizen can share language and logic which enables them to resolve their shared concerns. This is because we believe equality requires not just a chance to express a view at the ballot box but also the opportunity to participate in the conversations that shape the choices on offer.

A moral imperative

Of course, politics is the site of discussion, deliberation and, ultimately, compromise. Interests compete with ideals, emotions with reason. It involves practical and often difficult choices made amid considerable constraints. However, the period ahead offers

² Sacks, J *The Dignity of Difference* (Continuum, London, 2002)

³ Rawls, J *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1995)

us an opportunity to speak with candour and courage about the narratives that guide our ambitions, and so uphold politics as a site of important moral choice. Democracy has never been simply about who is a better legislative technician. Politics, at its best, has always been imbued with a moral imperative. Political figures of real stature, from Nye Bevan to Nelson Mandela, have also been teachers – their words and their actions bridging the divide between where society was and where their values demanded society should be. The clash of moral and ethical perspectives gives politics much of its energy; from the claims of competing parties that their agenda alone offers the best future for the nation.

Making explicit the ethical foundations of the Labour movement is not a new concern; its strength has historically derived from the conviction that only when acting together and directed by our shared values can we create a better society. Today Britain is a country in which social cohesion, equality of opportunity, a sense of community and commitment to public services are at the core of the people's aspirations for their society. The moral values that underpin our progressive politics strike a resonant chord with the moral values held by the British public. Indeed, it can credibly be argued that today the modern British character is innately progressive.

Against such a backdrop, there are certainly lessons to be learned from the recent US election, which saw the Republicans root their politics explicitly in a set of values which people chose in contrast to a more familiar, materialistic view of voters' motivations. The Republican campaign was about reaching out to people and asking them to affirm their shared cultural and moral values. In turn, people responded so that the Republicans won not only the popular vote but also both Congress and the Senate.

Yet, if we are confident in our values and recognise the lessons we can learn from British history and the American elections, we must also acknowledge the challenges of the context in which we seek to make explicit our moral purpose. At the time of the 2001 election, the four largest development aid agencies had over three times more supporters than the combined membership of the three main political parties.⁴ Citizens are increasingly participating in activities – such as single-issue campaigns – without seeing these as activities in which party politics should or could play a role.

⁴ At the time of the last election, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Action Aid and Save the Children had 2.7 million members. At the same time the membership of political parties stood at 800,000. (Taken from Bartleby, *J The Emerging Politics* (2002) (www.biblesociety.org.uk/exploratory/articles/bartley02.doc))

Labour needs to engage these people in our vision of the good society. While it has become popular in recent decades to deride the role of political parties, only political parties allow the formation of the lasting and coherent coalitions that allow sustained progress to be made. They are the means by which we come together to find common purpose through our shared ideals, and common focus through shared deliberation and discussion. Without them, politics and the decision making that many nonparty political groups seek to influence would be rooted only in the temporary whims of populism, with scant regard for the inevitable consequences of any decisions made.

It is important to understand that building a progressive consensus grounded in those moral values requires not solely a new type of communication, but a new approach to politics. The problems we face, the opportunities we have as a movement and the confidence we can be afforded by our principles require a new response to take the debate, discussion and deliberation of progressive politics forward. At the heart of this will be our ability to make explicit the values that sustain a progressive policy agenda. It requires more than a statement of intent; it requires a rallying call that reflects who we are, what we stand for and for whom we govern.

Chapter 1

Lessons from history – the role of values in progressive politics

Lessons from history – the role of values in progressive politics

The morality of a political party's motivations speaks to the very heart of the role of politics in society, as the way in which citizens come together to decide collectively how their society functions. We on the left understand that the decisions made in this process are integral to determining the resources, opportunities and life chances given to every member of society. As Jonathan Sacks has argued,⁵ "politics raises questions that cannot be answered by political calculation alone".

Indeed, it is important not to confuse the processes of politics with moral reasoning. Sacks makes clear that it is the role of the politician not to prescribe the moral framework of modernity but to find ways in which society can come together and, in a fair and open fashion, decide these structures for ourselves. Within such a process of deliberation, discussion and decision making, it is the particular perspectives taken which reflect moral concerns. To that extent, to vote or voice an opinion within the public realm, as politics requires of us, is to express a moral belief because it is to choose one vision of how the world should be over another. The difference between political parties then comes from a contrast in the values that determine their vision and, in turn, define their distinctive claims to government at an election.

There are those who take a narrow view of human nature and see politics as the pursuit of competing personal interests alone and humanity as a simple composite of material-seeking beings and nothing more. In this perspective, political action is about appealing to the pocketbooks of every individual and ensuring they experience minimal interference in their capacity to pursue their personal desires. In contrast, the left's political morality takes a very different view of humanity. It is founded on the belief that we are meaning-seeking beings too, who wish not simply to live in perpetual competition with our fellow citizens but also to practise mutually beneficial co-operation. The politics of the Labour movement are defined by an abiding belief that there is more to life than markets, exchange and contracts; instead nonmaterial values are esteemed as the true measure of the good society. In such a world-view, individuals alone can accomplish good within the conditions in which they live, but communities working together can transcend these barriers to attain a better future for all.

5 Sacks, J *The Dignity of Difference* (ibid)

The moral impulse that underpins the philosophical roots of British progressive political thought can be traced throughout the history of the British left. In his biography of William Morris, EP Thompson⁶ emphasised that Morris was “brought to Socialism by his conscious revolt against that mechanical materialism which reduced the story of mankind to an objectless record of the struggle for the survival of the ‘fittest’, and which, in his own time, under whatever high-sounding phrases, put profit and not ‘free and full life’ as the touchstone of value”.

Over the past century, Labour politicians and activists have sought to define the moral claim at the heart of our politics. Prior to election in 1940, Clement Attlee addressed the nation on the reasons why Labour supported the coalition government of the time. In his radio broadcast, he outlined the moral impulse at the heart of the British left. He said:⁷

The Labour Party owes its inspiration not to some economic doctrine or some theory of class domination. It has always based its propaganda on ethical principles. We believe every individual should be afforded the fullest opportunity for developing his or her personality. The founder of our party, Keir Hardie, always made his appeal on moral grounds. He believed the evils of society were due to the failure to put into practice the principles of the brotherhood of man ... The Labour Party's object is the building of a new world on the foundation of social and economic justice.

We can see how the moral impulse behind the Attlee politics in 1940 defined the Labour government's policy agenda in 1945. Indeed, there is no greater reflection of a concern for nonmaterial values than the National Health Service, which upholds the importance of healthcare for all, free at the point of need. The NHS is a practical reflection of the philosophy of progressive politics, showing how our politics stand in contradiction to the idea that human beings are atomised, material-acquiring individuals making our lonely way through a vast, impersonal marketplace. Labour has always understood that the market alone cannot deliver the reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity which fortify our vision of the good society. Instead, through its principles and working practices, the NHS promotes a profoundly different view of the human condition: that as a nation we have linked destinies, common concerns and shared needs. The market power of an individual has no bearing or consequence on their treatment. The NHS thus embodies a set of values different from the market; it is a commitment to mutuality, shared responsibility, and a sense of shared kindness that underpins the health service.

⁶ Thompson, EP *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Stanford University Press, 1988)

⁷ Attlee, C *As It Happened* (William Heineman, London, 1954)

The policies that have been successful for Labour throughout the past century were rooted not simply in the popular demands of the times but in a desire to express the values that underpin our movement. Achieving that goal meant getting both the policy and the politics right. Indeed, our concept of a national health service was not a given in postwar society, but a policy for which Labour politicians fought tooth and nail. The arguments were rooted not in technocratic arguments but in a passionate and principled commitment to social justice. In turn, support for a national health service came not just from within the Labour movement but was built up through a shared sense of moral urgency across society. The Beveridge report itself helped stir the conscience of the nation based on a belief that postwar Britain must be a more equal and socially just society. Beveridge himself said, “social conscience, when barbarous tyranny abroad has ended, should drive us to take up different arms in a new war against Want, Disease, Ignorance and Squalor at home.”⁸

Ethical commitment to healthcare

In just one term of office, Labour bequeathed British society the precious inheritance of public service provision, which subsequent generations of progressive British politicians have fought to defend and advance. So, in 1948, in partnership with a Labour government, the British people came together to create an institution that has transformed British society dramatically, reducing health inequalities. This progressive consensus has sustained not just the practical policy of a national health service for 60 years but also an ethical commitment to healthcare for all in British society, which subsequent generations have upheld.

Indeed, one of the reasons that the NHS has proven so resilient is that it is simply a better way to deliver healthcare – it was true in the early 1950s and it is true today. It shows how, no matter how much the age in which we live changes, the ability of society to work together to provide collectively healthcare that can meet the needs of every citizen remains constant. This is what makes it so compelling in making the case for progressive politics. The NHS does not claim the superiority of progressive policy; rather, it shows the superiority of these policies in its actions every day. Notwithstanding the attacks by the Conservatives during the 1980s, the NHS exists today as a modern, changing institution – and a powerful testament to the morality of progressive politics.

Later generations have continued to fight for Labour using the moral force of progressive

8 Beveridge, W *Full Employment in a Free Society* (HMSO, London, 1944)

politics – as Harold Wilson famously once said: “This Party is a moral crusade or it is nothing.”⁹ And even amid the defeat of the 1987 election, Neil Kinnock defined Labour’s claim to office:¹⁰

That’s what this election is about as she parades her visions and values, and we choose to contest them as people with root in this country, with a future only in this country, with pride in this country. People who know that if we are to have and sustain real individual liberty in this country, it requires the collective effort of the whole community.

Our moral values provide the bridge across the generations, giving meaning and purpose to every era of the Labour movement. When we look at the individual policies of each generation, we may not recognise the challenges our forebears faced, but we understand the answers progressive politics gave. The challenges that we have to answer in modern Britain are different, but the sense of moral purpose that guides our approach stays the same.

Thus, the principles that inspired our forebears remain the touchstone of progressive politics – but the policies change to recognise the different opportunities presented to each generation. We can see how different the world of 2005 is from the world of 1945; the pace of technological change, the aspirations of the public, the growth of the global economy and the social and cultural landscape of today would all be alien to Attlee and his colleagues. To fail to identify these would make Labour a reactive rather than a proactive force, forever bound by events as they unfold rather than being at the forefront of directing social change. So, of course, institutions such as the NHS must not become monuments to an imagined progressive past, but instead adapt to the new challenges and demands that our society faces today and in the years to come, in order to continue to move Britain towards our vision of the good society. Indeed, the NHS at its best has always been an institution capable of responding to the changing needs of the people it serves – whether in providing mass immunisation in the 1950s or working to meet the contemporary challenge of obesity.

That history shows progressive arguments can be fought and won on that foundation, and in turn policy achievements such as the NHS be accomplished, reflects how progressive political change can transform our country. So too, in the modern era Labour can confidently state that the economic conditions we live in are not luck, nor are the levels

⁹ Harold Wilson, at Labour Party Conference, quoted in *The Times*, London, 2 October 1962

¹⁰ Neil Kinnock, at Welsh Labour Party Conference, Llandudno, 15 May 1987

of public service investment that this country is now experiencing a happy coincidence; they are the consequences of Labour's actions in office. It is progressive values that make us active, rather than passive government. Put simply, the left finds its impetus from a belief that there has to be a better way for society to be and thus we cannot sit back and do nothing in order to effect that change. The poverty and inequality we still see in our society offends the moral impulse that underpins our movement. Thus, our sense of purpose is complemented by a determination that things should and could be better.

This determination finds its focus in the progressive political belief in the positive benefits to society of collective action. We have confidence in the capacity of humanity to work together to achieve change, whatever the challenges society faces. Thus, it is a political philosophy that gives us courage that, even in our lifetime, our awareness of the power of forces such as globalisation or capitalism to define and shape social outcomes can be matched by a positive belief in the potential of political institutions to do the same. As Robert Reich argues:¹¹

The choice is ours to make. We are no more slaves to present trends than to vestiges of the past. We can, if we choose, assert that our mutual obligations as citizens extend beyond our economic usefulness to one another, and act accordingly.

Throughout history, Labour has drawn strength from the courage of these convictions, and made plain the moral foundations of socialism as the basis of our claim to power. Thus today, for the left, it is these ethical values that are the petrol in our tank – the fuel that should motivate not only our people, but also our policy making and our political activities.

11 Reich, R *The Work of Nations* (Simon & Schuster, London, 1991)

Chapter 2

Lessons from abroad – the role of values in recent elections

Lessons from abroad – the role of values in recent elections

If we look to the international political context, we see how the capacity of political movements to define their own distinctive moral values has been critical to their electoral success. Indeed, since the last election in the UK, in 2001, the fortunes of sister progressive parties around the world have given give us a perplexing picture across Europe and beyond. In Australia, France, the Netherlands, Italy and the US they have suffered comprehensive and persistent defeat at the ballot box. Only Germany in 2002 and the 2003 Spanish elections buck this trend.

What then can be learned from these elections? Are these mixed fortunes specific to individual nations or do they speak to something deeper, which progressive politics must understand if it is to challenge the growing ascendancy of conservative and right-wing parties across the globe? This chapter will consider the most recent example of conservative success – the US elections – where the Republican right was victorious because it set out its own distinctive moral claim to office. As Tony Blair said of these results: “It is a good idea to listen to what they are saying and to try and analyse and understand it.”

At first glance, it may seem that a contest in which gun control, partial birth abortion and stem cell research were judged critical policy differences between the parties is of little relevance to British party politics. Yet, if generals are prone to fight the last war, too often politicians fight the last campaign. So it is vital that we learn the right lessons from our progressive opposite numbers – so that we can use them for Britain.

There are basic electoral challenges faced by the US that resonate here. While voting in presidential elections had for several decades been below the 50% mark, in November last year the Americans achieved a turnout of 60% – the biggest since the turbulent 1968 election, when around 120 million Americans voted. In terms of the popular vote, the presidential vote was close but decisive. George Bush increased his share of the vote among Hispanic, Catholic and Jewish voters, among older people, women, and even city dwellers. He turned a 500,000 popular vote defeat in 2000 into a 3.6 million victory. He is the first president of either party since Franklin Roosevelt in 1936 to be re-elected while gaining seats in both the Congress and the Senate.

Yet the lessons from Bush's success – and, indeed, other recent electoral victories for both the right and the left across the world – reflect something deeper than good organisation. At a fundamental level, the scale of the Republican success holds important insights for

Labour about how a party of power can not only solidify but strengthen its hold on the common sense of its times. Since Barry Goldwater's candidacy in 1964, the right in America has been building a uniquely powerful political movement. It has its own think tanks, sources of money and grass-roots organisations, and its own radio stations and TV channels. Crucially, it has also put in place a unifying ideology that brings together an otherwise diverse coalition, including evangelical Christians, gun owners, blue-collar workers and corporate business.

The influence of this coalition was already clear in 1994 with the work of the 700 Club, a daily evangelical news broadcast. Of the 52 freshman Republican congressman – who ended four decades of Democratic rule that year – 44 owed their election to the Christian coalition that endorsed them through the 700 Club.¹² In the 2004 poll, almost a quarter of the electorate said that moral values were their top concern – 80% of those voted for Bush. The Republicans made gay marriage their “wedge issue” of choice and apparently used it effectively to mobilise Protestant evangelicals.

This coalition was also able to run a grass-roots campaign, reaching out through personal recommendations and one-on-one contacts from fellow members of congregations to persuade voters that Bush shared their values. It was an approach geared not to communicating a general message about the particulars of Republican policies but one which, in the words of the Republican national committee chairman Ken Mehlman, was designed to persuade. Thus, they developed a machine that did not just talk at the voters about their achievements, but reached out to argue the case for Bush in a way that every target voter could understand.

British psephologist Maggie Scammell compared the techniques to those used by Amway, the world's most successful pyramid seller:¹³

Party recruiters, equipped with communication aid “toolboxes” and offered incentives of prizes, were tasked to set up pyramids of volunteers, whose contact with voters feeds off and into the central database, to enable ever more precise polling and direct mailing.

Moral and spiritual yearnings

The coalition was so strong that it defined the terms of political engagement on which the election was fought. From the start of the campaign, it seemed as if John Kerry was

12 www.guardian.co.uk/uselections2004/comment/story/0,14259,1355381,00

13 Maggie Scammell, “Voting for Democracy”, *LSE Magazine* Vol 16, Number 2, 2004

playing catch-up. The two most memorable images of the Democratic campaign tell their own story. The first showed him offering a military salute as he “reported for duty” at the convention. The second showed him goose hunting, gun in hand. It is to his credit and that of his campaign leadership that Kerry realised early on that he needed to reach out to those voters – not just in the South but also in the American heartland – for whom the issue of whether the candidate shared their “values” was at least as important as either security or the economy. That is something that in past decades only Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton (incidentally, both Southerners with evangelical support) have managed to do. As Stan Greenberg argues:¹⁴ “In the end, the Republicans asked people not to judge Bush’s performance in office but to vote their beliefs and world view.”

Harvard University’s Michael Sandel said¹⁵ that the Democrats have allowed the Republicans a monopoly on the moral and spiritual sources of American politics. He believes that the Democrats “will not recover as a party until they again have candidates who can speak to those moral and spiritual yearnings – but turn them to progressive purposes in domestic and foreign affairs”. Bush’s political guru, Karl Rove, says that this “rolling realignment” is ending the long partisan stalemate in Washington and tipping the balance of political power in the Republicans’ favour.

Robert Reich, a former Clinton cabinet member, admitted:¹⁶

We failed because we failed to build a political movement behind us. Clinton is a gifted politician who accomplished something no Democrat since Roosevelt had done: he got re-elected. But his effect on the party was to blur what Democrats stand for. He neither started nor sustained a political movement.

In contrast, the right in America has understood that the point for any political party is not simply to inhabit the centre ground but to shift it, consciously and irrevocably, towards its own vision of a good society. The Republican victory suggests that building strength in office demands not simply following public opinion but working with it to fashion a new “common sense”. Bush and the Republicans sought and secured their second-term mandate in a very different way from the “triangulation” strategy that secured re-election for Clinton in 1996. With the strength of the Republican movement

14 Greenberg, S. *The Two Americas: Our Current Political Deadlock & How to Break it* (updated paperback edition, Thomas Dunne Books, forthcoming 2005)

15 Quoted by Thomas L. Friedman in “Two Nations under God”, *International Herald Tribune*, 5 November 2004

16 Robert Reich, “Dismal Democrats”, *Prospect Magazine*, May 2004

behind him, Bush's aim was to shift public sentiment, rather than his party's position. Most of all, the movement's strength allowed him to reflect American people's concern about their personal and national security and to suggest that he alone was speaking up for America and the values of the American people. As Stan Greenberg noted of the Bush campaign:¹⁷

The campaign strengthened the essential structure of the Two Americas, widened the gulf between the religious and secular, married and single, and gun owners and the unarmed ... Bush's determined cultural war was not limited to firing up Republican loyalist supporters, though it was certainly that. It energised and raised turnout disproportionately of Republican-aligned, socially conservative voters. By forcing people to choose sides in the culture war, they took their issues way beyond the base and into the contested and Democratic worlds.

Furthermore, it was clear that Kerry was deeply uncomfortable with an election fought in these terms. As both Greenberg and Andrei Cherny¹⁸ have acknowledged, Kerry resisted advice to develop an alternative progressive values narrative for his campaign, preferring to focus on customary electoral policy debates such as those around tax cuts. That such cultural and moral polarisation was effective can be seen in the concerns voters raised about Kerry. When asked to choose their three biggest doubts about Kerry from a list, 92% of voters selected an issue pertaining to values and social issues, while just 50% cited an issue pertaining to national security, with only 28% choosing fears about him raising taxes or expanding the size of government.¹⁹

Less contemporary electoral experiences also reveal a similar trend. Progressives in Holland and France have described²⁰ the difficulties they faced in their respective parliamentary and presidential elections in 2002 in aligning good economic management with social progress in a way that connected with voters. In contrast, the right in those countries provided a narrative that caught the imagination of the public. Meanwhile, in America the conservatives dwelt on concerns about security, and in Europe the right peddled outright fear. Superficially grounded in a language of integration, Pim Fortuyn's campaign advocated a suspicion of "outsiders" – similarly to Le Pen, who was simply more explicit. Those elections reflect how the success of the far right across Europe has been achieved

17 Greenberg, S (ibid)

18 Andrei Cherny, "How FDR Spoke about Values Renewed Deal", *The New Republic*, 22 November 2004

19 Democracy Corps/Institute for America's Future post-election survey of 2,000 voters, conducted 2-3 November 2004. Quoted in Greenberg, S (ibid)

20 See debate in "The Challenge of Renewal", *Progressive Governance Journal* Vol 1.12002

through creating an identity for its supporters based on demonising others who are “different”.

Diversity within society then becomes a focal point for the fears of those who do not consider themselves different because, by default, they are not a member of the “outgroup”. John Lloyd described the appeal of the far right thus:²¹ “They see politics as thus: they are the liberators of their people from chains round them over decades by Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Conservatives and Liberals who have one thing in common: they do not listen to the people.” Neither Pim Fortuyn’s List Party nor the National Front have been able to repeat their electoral success – however, their success showed it is not only in America that voters are not looking for the party that offers the most to satisfy their buying power but instead seek the one which offers the most to satisfy their sense of belonging.

Voters require a sense of the vision and values in order to be motivated. The political parties that were successful understood the emotional as well as the rational dimension to politics, and were correspondingly able to translate their values into a set of policies whose grounding in a narrative made them resonate to the electorate. We can see that where the left has failed to humanise the gains of politics and so make real to the electorate the outcomes of our policy agenda, it has failed either to win or to maintain power.

These international examples affirm the importance of asserting clearly the ethical foundation of what political parties do. The ability to define a clear narrative about their moral perspective is a key test for any government. It is clear that while being in office should not stop politicians from asserting their ethical motivations, it all too often does so. This leaves incumbent parties peculiarly vulnerable to those campaigners who can communicate an alternative political perspective that catches the attention and secures the support of the public. Indeed, as the recent US election shows, even the most successful campaigning machinery must be sustained through a strong political mission.

Seen in the context of the experiences of other progressive parties internationally, it becomes clear that the challenge for Labour is to find a way of bringing together, into one overall story, past achievements with future ambitions for the years ahead; speaking up for the core values at the heart of our politics as the means to explain our actions.

²¹ John Lloyd, “No to Brussels, No to Immigration: How Rightwing Populism Entered into the Mainstream”, *The Financial Times*, 28 November 2002

Chapter 3

Different countries, different challenges?

Different countries, different challenges?

The analysis in the previous two chapters has shown how making explicit the moral impulse which guides political change has been integral to both recent international electoral results and the history of the Labour movement. From this analysis there appears a clear message for our campaigning activities in the run-up to the next election: following in the footsteps of our forebears in progressive politics, Labour must assert the ethical foundation to its activities so that voters can recognise not just our politics but our inspiration for action.

Yet to argue that the vision and values offered to the electorate by the Republicans was critical to the elections is not to suggest that these can be imported to the UK. Furthermore, to recognise the ethical core of the agenda offered by previous Labour governments does not mean we must offer the same programme of change. Notwithstanding the shared progressive values which link progressive parties internationally and through the generations, it is important to recognise the differences between the electoral landscape faced by the Democrats and by Labour in the 21st century. Indeed, as the second chapter acknowledged, political success lies not only in the courage of our convictions, but in how these convictions stem from a deep, and almost innate, comprehension of the context of modern lives. So alongside the lessons that can be learned from American politics and British history must be added an awareness of the specific conditions in which such lessons could be applied.

The UK of 2005 is a nation on a very different social and cultural trajectory from the US. In particular, while Britain shares many challenges in common with other nations – such as globalisation, the pace of technological change and international terrorism – there are also differences that reflect the changes in British society since the 1940s. This chapter will examine in more detail the three particular qualities that stand out: voter disengagement; growing secularism; and the relationship between the government and the media.

Self-authorship and political parties

Perhaps the strongest contrast between recent American and British electoral experiences is the growing evidence of voter disengagement and falling turnout that has characterised British politics for the past two decades. The enviable rise in voter turnout experienced in the American elections offers, at the very least, organisational lessons about “getting out the vote” which every British party will now be trying to learn.

From the Countryside Alliance to the Iraq marchers, UK residents have revealed themselves as intensely exercised about political issues. Yet, this is not the story at the ballot box. At the last election the turnout was 59%, the lowest for 80 years, with wide variations across the country. Indeed, the lowest turnout was in Liverpool Riverside, where just 34.1% of the electorate voted – a massive drop of 17.5% on 1997. While the Americans experienced a reversal of falling turnout in the presidential elections, all the indications are that this will not be the case in the UK. Over the course of the past two years, MORI's own polling data shows that only 50% of the population say they are certain to vote at all.²²

It is difficult to know yet whether the increased turnout at the presidential elections was specific to 2004 or marks a turning point in political engagement in America. However, it is clear that across both the UK and the US, research shows people are turning to protest politics and membership of organisations. As the introduction noted, at the time of the last election in the UK, the four largest development aid agencies had over three times more supporters than the combined membership of the three main political parties. There is no evidence that this trend has reversed – indeed, there is a growing body of research which suggests that all major political parties could face a crisis in membership in the years to come.

Other recent research suggests that this is not about political disengagement, but about party political disengagement. UK data shows that rather than people losing interest in politics, they remain as politically concerned as they were 20 years ago.²³ Instead, British citizens are increasingly participating in activities – such as single-issue campaigns – without seeing them as connected to the concerns of political parties.²⁴ There is also evidence that this phenomenon is most pronounced among younger voters.²⁵

This contrasts with recent research in America about the attitudes of young adults to the presidential elections. Thomas Patterson's Vanishing Voter project at Harvard University concluded that during the presidential elections half of all young adults were talking politics daily – double the percentage reported by Patterson during the 2000 campaign. These figures show what many of us in politics recognise from our own experiences in our constituencies: the familiar democratic paradigm known to our predecessors, in which the

22 MORI, "Likelihood of Voting", longitudinal data (www.mori.com)

23 See, for example, *British Social Attitudes: The 19th Report* (National Centre for Economic & Social Research, December 2002)

24 *None of the Above: Non-Voters & the 2001 Election* (MORI/Hansard Society, December 2001)

25 Marsh et al *Explaining Non-participation: Towards a Fuller Understanding of the "Political"* (ESRC Regard Database, January 2004). Also, Whiteley, P *Civic Renewal & Participation in Britain* (Active Citizenship Unit, Home Office, 2004)

overwhelming majority of people listen to the competing claims of political parties and then vote, is crumbling.

There is a growing debate about whether the causes of this changing attitude towards politics even lie in particularly political issues or reflect deeper trends within society. The writer Andrei Cherny argues²⁶ that younger voters who are interested in politics care too much to participate in the antiquated structures of political party-led democracy and prefer to be part of grassroots organisations, which allow a more direct and “authentic” experience of activism.

Others say that the growing desire for a personal and unique sense of self has led individuals to seek experiences – both public and private – which offer a sense of individuality rather than a “one size fits all” approach. In their book, *The Support Economy*, Shoshana Zuboff and James Maxmin²⁷ posit that in contemporary society, in which the individual takes precedence over the society, organisations that seek to standardise their offer to the public will lose support and interest against those that can reach out and connect with an individual’s emotional sense of worth. They say that: “Variation and complexity are treasured, and nurtured, not banished. They are the new sources of wealth.”

In contrast, political parties were created in the industrial era as a mechanism for mobilising class-based groups and so depend on homogeneity and instinctive tribalism. For modern-day consumers used to websites such as Amazon – which tailor the pages they offer to every user – or the choice of a multitude of specialist cable television channels, they do not offer the interactivity and dialogue that individuals require in their relationships with organisations in order to feel valued and, in turn, value such organisations.

Political campaigning is often grounded in a practical effort to “get out the vote”, assuming its loyalty is beyond doubt, rather than an effort to persuade the electorate as to why they should vote at all. While a pressure group allows an individual to express a specialist interest, supporting a political party offers little to an individual in terms of allowing them to articulate their unique sense of identity. Some have set up political parties that are entirely focus-group led and explicitly eschew notions of ideology or indeed morality, for example, www.YourParty.org. YourParty.org intends to field candidates at the next election, saying that it has “no bias about the best way forward in the future, but seeks to

26 Cherny, A *The Next Deal: The Future of Public Life in the Information Age* (Basic Books, 2000)

27 Zuboff, S, Maxmin, J *The Support Economy: Why Corporations Are Failing Individuals & the Next Episode of Capitalism* (Penguin Books, London, 2004)

find common ground between citizens from all political persuasions”.

As modern political parties are increasingly seen by some as an inauthentic expression of voice for the hopes and aspirations of individuals, citizens turn increasingly to private alternatives as an expression of their concerns for the future. The writer Frank Furedi has argued²⁸ that many citizens express their political concerns through their personal consumer activity. He posits that the growing respect accorded to consumer activism is proportional to the decline of public trust in conventional authority and that this is symptomatic of a wider atomisation within modernity which sees individual experience as more important than the collective good. For Furedi, widespread disenchantment with conventional institutions has created an opening for new, alternative forms of authority. The main beneficiary of this process has been consumer activism, which he suggests has been able to promote itself as a credible alternative source of authority. Furedi argues that:

Consumer activism has managed to project an image that contrasts favourably with the squalid reputation of party politics. It has succeeded in winning a reputation for its selflessness and its ability to rise above disreputable adversarial politics.

From this viewpoint it is interesting to compare the growth in ethical consumerism with the decline in party political activity. UK sales of products with the FAIRTRADE mark rose by 90% between 2000 and 2002 to an estimated retail value of £63 million. In contrast, 40 years ago the Labour Party had a membership of nearly 1 million, the Conservatives' membership stood at over 2.5 million²⁹ and turnout at elections hovered around 80%.³⁰ However, by 2002, membership of the Labour Party stood at 280,000 and the Conservatives recorded a membership of 330,000.³¹ While many progressives would welcome and indeed be active consumers of FAIRTRADE products, alongside this it is important not to diminish the potential of democratic action to achieve change. Thus, progressive politicians must also seek recognition for the fact that by working together they are actively seeking to change the very terms of global trade, to give poor countries a better deal. Were society to cede to the notion that only individual actions can change the world and not the will of collective government, we would limit the potential changes possible.

28 Frank Furedi, "Consuming Democracy: Activism, Elitism & Political Apathy" (www.geser.net/furedi.html)

29 Bleetham et al *Democracy under Blair: A Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom* (Politicos Publishing, 2002)

30 *UK Election Statistics: 1918-2004* (House of Commons Research Paper 04/61, 2004)

31 <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/specialreports/tables/0,9071,641234,00.html>

Tom Bentley has argued³² that these trends are about more than the shopping choices consumers make, but speak to a desire to express an identity:

The depth of appetite for personal fulfilment and autonomy goes far further than this participation in consumer markets superficially suggests. Consumerism, in that sense, is one expression of past successes in the left's efforts to "liberate" the majority from constraints of class, gender and poverty. It takes forward the desire for autonomy, which is also at the root of ideas of democratic self-government. The dominance of consumerism in modern social life points in part to collapse of other narratives of progress; religious, ideological and other traditional community values no longer occupy such a central place in the public interpretation of who is achieving what, of whether life is actually getting better.

Each of these commentaries on the contemporary age shares a recognition that the falling turnout we are experiencing in the UK and other Western countries reflects not a passing disinterest in politics but a deeper malaise between the state and the individual. These commentaries offer a new and challenging analysis of the British public realm, which does not seek to lay blame but instead recognises the differing strands of social and cultural change involved. The electorate is moving away from a deferential approach where supporting political parties is a mechanical reflex grounded in tradition, to one in which support for political issues comes from a more contractual conception of the benefits a party can bring to voters.

So, political parties, as they operate at present, appear to some to conflict with the growing desire for self-authorship within modern life. The process of atomisation within society, in which notions of individualism and personal freedom are valued above all, are seen to be in opposition to the traditional structures and narratives which define the role of such collective entities. From such a viewpoint, political parties are judged less able to compete with more authentic ways of expressing personal opinion and so members of the public are increasingly finding new ways of speaking out for their values.

The analysis put forward by these authors challenges the democratic processes which are critical to our success as a political movement; indeed, our obligation to tackle this disengagement extends beyond the familiar concern of political parties to maximise their votes at elections. The Labour movement was forged by the recognition that a more equal

32 Tom Bentley, "The Self-creating Society", *Renewal Magazine* Vol 12 No 1, 2004

society can be driven only by a process in which every person has their say, be they a millionaire, a maths teacher or a miner. If the ballot box becomes increasingly irrelevant to society as a way of making decisions about how we wish to live, then the capacity to ensure all voices are heard equally on the matters at hand is diminished – leaving just those with the loudest voices or the biggest wallets to shape our world.

The rise of secular Britain: what are our morals?

Religious affiliation played a strong part in the US elections as the Republicans sought to link their political agenda with a series of moral values grounded in religious teachings. In contrast, there is increasing evidence that Britain has become an increasingly secular society over the past 60 years. The 2001 census,³³ the first to record religious affiliation, shows that just over three-quarters of the UK population report having a religion, with 72% describing themselves as Christian and 3% describing themselves as Muslim. Yet a survey by MORI³⁴ in 2003 revealed that fewer than one in five British people (18%) say they are practising members of an organised religion, with a quarter (25%) being nonpractising members. A further quarter (24%) are spiritually inclined but “do not really belong to an organised religion”, while 14% are agnostic and 12% are atheist. A report by Anglican researchers in 2002 called *Hope for the Church* predicted that by 2030 there would be practically no members of the Church of England if current trends continue.³⁵

This contrasts with the US, where the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies’ census³⁶ of church membership found that there were 140 million “religious adherents” claimed by 149 religious bodies in 2000, with half (50.2%) of all Americans associated with one of these groups. Catholics are the largest single religious group in the US with more than 60 million adherents. However, the combined Protestant groups report 66 million adherents. Furthermore, statistics show that about 43% of Americans – mainly in the South and Midwest – attend church on a regular basis. The effect this has on American politics is clear, with political party membership reflecting differing attitudes to the role of religious values in public policy. Recent Gallup polling³⁷ showed that the majority of Democrats (67%) say there is too much religious influence, compared with 28% of Republicans. More than half of Republicans (55%) say there is too little, while only a quarter of Democrats (25%) would agree.

33 www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/default.asp

34 www.mori.com/polls/2003/bbc-heavenandearth-top.shtml

35 Bartlett, J *Parenting with Spirit* (Rider, 2004)

36 www.glenmary.org/grc/RCMS_2000/findings.htm

37 www.gallup.com/poll/content/?ci=14422

In contrast, research in the UK has shown that the demographic characteristics of religious belief are reflected in political affiliation and we should be wary of drawing a correlation between religious and political affiliation. In 2000, MORI's research³⁸ showed that while the Conservatives had higher than average levels of support among Anglicans and lower levels among Catholics and atheists, much of this simply reflects the demographic characteristics of religious belief. As MORI points out, Christians, especially Anglicans (and, above all, active Anglicans) tend to be older and more middle-class than the population as a whole – a category of people who are also more likely to vote.

While the American exposition of the moral impulse of political activity finds its expression and vigour in an overtly religious voice, it is clear that a similar analysis would be difficult and indeed highly controversial within British society. In the modern era, the UK recognises and celebrates a diversity of faiths and cultures within its borders in a way that accords with a progressive viewpoint. Yet in these circumstances some, like Richard Layard,³⁹ believe that "we are in a situation of moral vacuum, where there are no agreed concepts of how unselfish a person should be, or of what constitutes a good society".

However, there is strong evidence that the moral values that underpin the Labour movement strike a chord with the moral values held by the British public. The progressive instincts of the British people are evident within the ongoing work of the British social attitudes surveys.⁴⁰ These findings cumulatively show that Britain is a nation that has strong progressive instincts. This is a country in which social cohesion, equality of opportunity, a sense of community and a commitment to high-quality public services are at the core of the people's aspirations for their society.

Acknowledging a shared moral affinity with the British public is critical to contemporary electoral politics. Put simply, voters do not enter the voting booth in the manner of accountants calculating take-home income. They have historically voted on hopes and resentments that are not always related to their wallets but are everything to do with their wishes for the future. It is these moral values that characterise the emotional content of progressive politics. For example, our commitment to equality comes not because it is the most effective way to aid the market but as the ethical core of the kind of society in which we wish to live, which values every individual. Thus, while the values

38 www.mori.com/mrr/2000/c000623.shtml

39 Richard Layard, third Lionel Robbins memorial lecture, 5 March 2003

40 See, for example, the 19th British social attitudes survey and in particular Taylor-Gooby, P, Hastie, C *Support for State Spending: Has New Labour Got It Right?* (National Centre for Social Research, 2002). See also Taylor-Gooby, P *Attitudes to Social Justice* (IPPR, 2005) (www.ippr.org/publications/files/attitudes%20to%20social%20justice.pdf)

that dominate contemporary British society are not dominated by religious connection, it is clear that an opportunity is open to British progressives to build on public concern for these issues and so define the moral concerns of the era as a challenge that can be answered only by progressive politics.

The corrosion of the public realm⁴¹

In the US, support and airtime from the conservative press substantially bolstered the ability of the Republican right to define the terms of engagement of the presidential election. In a recent article in *Time* magazine,⁴² Joe Klein identified how “toxic” the public square has become in America, with little possibility for rational discourse as the emphasis is on contentiousness rather than content. It is clear that the American “public square” is a warning to other democratic states: it has become, on many of the major TV and radio channels, a place where positions and pronouncements are given extreme form – either in such forms as “shock jock” radio (largely of the right) or in “discussions” which are competitions in denunciation or loudness.

Broadcasting in the UK has not chosen that route; but the same pressures are there, and the same impatience with debate and rational discussion – and the space that has to be devoted to it – is evident. Both politicians and journalists share an interest in a healthy “public square”, or civil society. This is the place where issues are debated and an attempt made to resolve them. Yet in recent years the relationship between the British media and British politics has considerably deteriorated. The Gilligan/Kelly affair and the subsequent Hutton report are still seen – nearly two years later – as a decisive breach between media and the state. But the relationship had been dysfunctional before then. In the 2001 Hetherington lecture, *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger said,⁴³ “politicians and the press are locked in a relationship which doesn’t really work for either”. He argued that both the media and politicians bore blame for what was subsequently identified by the Phillis review⁴⁴ as a “three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and the general public”.

This is a concern to the left because ours is a politics that presumes that the public realm is the place where issues are debated and an attempt made to resolve them. For this to function successfully for all participants – the government, the public, the press and

41 This chapter draws on the analysis developed fully by Alexander & Lloyd in *Prospect* magazine, April 2005.

42 Joe Klein, “The Uniter vs The Divider”, *Time*, 15 November 2004

43 Alan Rusbridger, “Politicians, the Press & Political Language”, Hetherington lecture, Stirling University, 7 November 2001

44 Phillis, B *An Independent Review of Government Communications* (January 2004) (www.gcreview.gov.uk/news/FinalReport.pdf)

opposition parties – there is a need for confidence that full and accurate information is presented. Journalism sees itself, rightly, as an essential element in a democratic state: free societies cannot exist, over time, without news media free to report and analyse, and able to carry a multiplicity of differing views – at least some of which will be identified with differing political philosophies and parties. Further, the quality of civic life is closely correlated to the quality of accuracy, discussion and thought in the society's journalism.

Yet to argue that a vibrant public realm and a free press are critical to a progressive society is not to say that the difficulties currently facing the public realm stem from the actions of politicians alone. In the past decade, the modern media have changed in rapid and fundamental ways. The move towards news around the clock, every day (“24/7 news”) should in theory have offered more space for discussion – but it actually tends to place greater emphasis on “newness” rather than extending the depth of news offered. As a result, viewers too often get surface, not substance. This rapid-fire reporting has privileged the role of reporters, who are often under pressure to offer more on-the-spot analysis and commentary, sometimes shallowly based. Ideally, rapid news should be complemented by deeper and fuller analysis, explanation and debate: but the trend, even in a country with rich traditions of current affairs programmes like Britain, has tended to be the other way. At the same time, one of the major trends in newspapers has been a move towards a more polemical and abrasive style.

Here again the comparison with American society reflects the problems ahead for the British public realm if we continue as we are. First in the US and now increasingly here, we have witnessed the “Oprahfication” of politics, where the growth of infotainment has seen boundaries between politics and entertainment become blurred. Such relentless concentration on personality has the apparently perverse effect of decreasing the space for human sympathy. Politics as reported then becomes a question of who is up and who is down, rather than being recognised as a site of fundamental choices for our national community.

Political parties, too, have played a role in creating the difficulties we now find in our public realm. The rise in professionalism in political communications has not been without its benefits to the Labour government. Labour has reason to be proud of the improvement in its media and political communications since the evident and disastrous amateurism of the 1983 campaign. The professionalisation of its activities, and a greater discipline when claiming the right to govern the state, formed a necessary and integral part of modernisation process. Put simply, the Labour Party would not have been able to communicate a vision of the good society and why it should be elected in 1997 without

a better capacity to communicate in the first place.

Yet, when that capacity to communicate overshadows what is being said, a reflection is needed on how politicians, as well as journalists, operate within the public square. The necessities of media management should not get in the way of the message and the mechanisms of governance themselves. The discipline and coherence needed to make messages clear, comprehensible and widely known carried with it a reliance on techniques of public relations, which, though effective, can also be potentially counterproductive. The political/media relationship thus falls into an ascending spiral of blame: the journalists point to spin, the politicians to a concentration on splits and personalities. The journalists allege insincerity, the politicians, distortion and lies. The journalists decry cover-ups; the politicians talk of the impossibility of private lives, and private mistakes.

The cumulative effect of all these pressures is a situation where, as Jedediah Purdy argued⁴⁵ in *American Prospect* in 1999:

To talk about politics today is to presume insincerity. It is the first requirement of even modest political sophistication to understand that public figures neither say what they mean, nor mean what they say. Rather than expressions of conviction, public statements are made according to the shifting rules of an elaborate game.

If unchallenged, the effect could be to construct a public world of commercial stimulation and ennui, in which there is no trusted space for us as a society to ask and answer the questions of the times. The danger is that unless we as a society do something to correct this situation and its corrosive effects on our public realm, increasingly the dominant voices left shaping political decisions could be those of the media alone.

It is clear then that learning from our international contemporaries or the Labour movement's history requires us as practising politicians to do more than import particular media techniques or copy particular policy prescriptions. Rather, this chapter has shown that we must recognise where the similarities – and the contrasts – lie and what this teaches us about the context in which we seek to do politics. The threat posed to progressive politics by the growing disengagement of the British public from the public realm is clear, and understanding the social and cultural forces behind this is a starting point for developing our capacity to address them.

45 Jedediah Purdy, "From Purity to Politics", *American Prospect* Vol 10, Issue 42, January 1999

There can be no doubt that the challenges identified are considerable and can seem at times overwhelming. Yet, so too is the evidence that where political parties reach out beyond the traditional confines of policy debates to speak about the ethical and moral core of their activities, there are signs of civic recovery. In that context, the opportunities for progressive politics in Britain are considerable – our challenge now is to identify how we can respond to the country we seek to lead in a way which develops these prospects.

Chapter 4

Putting it into practice – three examples of progressive politics

Putting it into practice – three examples of progressive politics

The previous chapters of this pamphlet have identified the role that moral discourses have played in both the history of the Labour movement and the recent electoral success of the Republican movement in America. These arguments have shown how politically and socially successful governments have built a momentum within society for both their politics and their policies. This has, in turn, sustained an army of foot soldiers who argued the case for their political beliefs at every opportunity throughout wider society. At the heart of this momentum has been the explicit portrayal of the moral impulse that informs their activities; an ethical platform on which their electoral and cultural success has been constructed.

Yet, as the previous chapter acknowledged, the difficulties facing both political processes and party politics in particular require us to reconsider how we operate in modern Britain. The challenge for us is twofold. First, defining the moral impulse of social justice, which informs our policy and political activities, requires us to find language that can give true and passionate expression to these values. Second, the context in which we seek to achieve our aims requires a different approach to politics and the public realm itself, which acknowledges these changing circumstances. The remainder of this pamphlet will address these challenges to our politics. Turning first to the question of how to express the moral impulse at the heart of progressive politics, this chapter will look at three different areas of contemporary policy development. It explores how the power of politically progressive arguments has achieved political change in recent years – and could do so in the future.

Our international obligations

Of all the issues of public policy debate, the changing political agenda around international development perhaps bears the strongest imprint of the capacity of progressive thought to deliver political change. Before Labour came to office in 1997, there was no Department for International Development and the funds for development aid had been whittled away by successive Conservative budgets. Since 1997 it has become increasingly clear that a new, progressive consensus about our international responsibilities is being built within British society. First, Jubilee 2000, and now the Make Poverty History campaign have combined with a progressive government to realise the possibility of tackling global poverty. This is a clear example of how progressive debate, discussion and decision making can come together to achieve real change. Some \$50 billion dollars of debt has now been cancelled, whereas before Jubilee 2000 it was only \$9 billion.

Twenty countries now receive debt relief where once it was only one, and as a result 200 million men and women now receive assistance where once it was only a few.

The moral impulse that sparked a concern for poverty, not just at home but worldwide, found its voice in the Jubilee 2000 campaign and its champion in a progressive government in power in the UK. This relationship has worked to legitimise and affirm progressive instincts, as the British government leads the way internationally on championing debt relief and the British public demands continued progress towards this goal. Together, the politicians and the public are able to broaden and deepen the scope for change because they inspire and encourage each other. Thus, Britain's commitment to put development issues at the top of the G8 summit agenda during its presidency speaks not just to the priorities of the British government, but to the character of the British nation.

Nowhere has this progressive moral impulse been clearer than in the public response to the horrific tsunami that struck Asia in December 2004. It is not a new phenomenon for the British people to exhibit such compassion, but it is indicative of the capacity of our nation to believe in something bigger and more fundamental than personal gain. The ability of the global community to come together to help the victims of the tsunami, and the growing international recognition of our duty to tackle world poverty, are all the more remarkable and heartening for progressives because driven by political will rather than by market forces. Indeed, Labour politicians have campaigned for debt relief not principally on its economic merits – although they exist – but because it is the right action to tackle a global injustice. This is a policy area driven by nonmaterial, not market, concerns. It reflects the capacity that a politics driven by public support, rooted in progressive values and given voice by practical policy outcomes can have, not simply to accommodate the world's problems but to start to transform them.

As we become increasingly aware, as a world community, of the interrelated nature of the problems each nation faces – whether environmental degradation, terrorism or globalisation – we become aware also that through collective action we can achieve real change. Indeed, there is a growing recognition that in today's world every international initiative relies ultimately on political will by national governments and their people. In short, that social, economic and cultural change comes down, in the end, to the moral duties national governments – especially the richest national governments – recognise and are prepared to discharge on behalf of their people. The work done on debt reduction shows that it is possible to win progressive arguments internationally and in a manner that makes their gains irreversible. The support for this progressive cause now transcends

party political boundaries, reflecting the sea change in attitudes this work has achieved in British politics.

The progressive consensus being built around debt reduction thus offers a template that shows how a progressive narrative can bring together a broad coalition to fight for change both from government and within the wider society. It offers a way of understanding how progressive political change – which relies not on the vagaries of the market but the active commitment of people – can happen in a way which gives a lie to those who fear that globalisation limits our capacity to secure such progressive ends. This narrative goes beyond providing a rationale for why progressive governments deserve re-election; it is the manifestation of the moral impulse that has made debt relief not simply a well-intentioned ambition but a real achievement.

The NHS – upholding the public service ethos amid change

If the experience of debt relief provides an example of what is possible, how then can we develop this approach around two key areas of policy debate – the future of the NHS and the changing nature of family and community life? Turning first to the NHS, it is certainly true that in the Labour movement's recent debates on the future of this service, the clarity of the moral impulse that it has always represented to us has sometimes been subsumed into the technicalities of policy. The necessary on-going discussions about how to ensure the NHS continues to adapt to the needs and demands of the modern world have too often become characterised as a battle within progressive politics, rather than as part and parcel of renewing the offer progressive politics can make to British society. During these discussions, many across the Labour movement have spoken of an ethos of public service and its role in characterising the realm of public life for the left. For all Labour politicians, it is our sense of a public service ethos that is central to our approach to public services and, in turn, shapes our policy process.

This is because our concern for, and advocacy of, the public service ethos is not solely a question of policy development but rather an acknowledgement of the political role progressive institutions such as the NHS must play in advancing our vision of the good society. Our commitment to a healthcare service that is free at the point of need is, like our commitment to debt relief, motivated by a moral concern that an individual's life is more important than his or her bank balance. It finds practical expression in an ethos of public service that celebrates this concern and those who support and sustain such a service, whether as patients or practitioners. Yet, more often than not, we have discussed rather than defined this ethos and instead focused attention on the policy specifics of

public service delivery. Indeed, while within the left we often talk about the elements of this ethos – the care and commitment of staff or the importance of patient involvement in treatment – we too rarely explore what is distinctive about these principles and what makes them so central to progressive political thinking.

However, our ability to do just that is critical to our capacity to define the moral values which underpin a progressive public service ethos. This is not simply because, in speaking up for the value to our society of such an ethos, we are able to honour the largest army for good in the country – the staff of the NHS – and so to fail to understand its value to us risks their motivations and ultimately our achievements. Nor even is it because we believe it affects how profoundly as a country and as a community we teach our young, care for our old or help those in need. Rather, spelling out this ethos and how it affects our thinking matters because it is founded in the core values of progressive politics identified in the first chapter of this pamphlet – to the ideas of reciprocity and mutualism – which mark out our politics.

For the British public, the ethos embodied in the NHS matters deeply to our sense that we are not individuals alone but members of a society with a shared duty to look after each other. It helps define who we are as a nation and our status as associational beings. By speaking up for this ethos within British society, we therefore emphasise the worth of humanity, because we are explicit that it is noble and fulfilling to serve the community of which one is part. As part of our shared cultural heritage, these ideas are influential well beyond the realms of public services and help to shape our sense of Britishness. MORI research to track attitudes towards the NHS⁴⁶ shows that consistently four out of five people agree that “the NHS is critical to British society and we must do everything we must do to maintain it”.

What opportunities does this ethos hold for enriching Labour’s political discourse? First and foremost, it is clear we must complement our policy discussions by being more vocal about the ethos that underlies our development. Specifically, in an age of intense pressure on the public provision of services, it requires us to argue the case that public services have benefits which go beyond those of commercial services, and so mark out clear differences between the values of the market and the values of institutions such as the NHS. We need to be clear, in the case we make to the British public for the continued development of healthcare provision, that the NHS is a service before it is a business.

46 www.mori.com/pubinfo/bp/nhs-tracker.pdf

As we seek to adapt such public services to meet the demands of modern societies, it is critical that the political significance of the public service ethos is not lost; once gone it is not readily reconstituted, and therefore it must be safeguarded. More than a legacy of times past, we recognise the significance of such debates not just to healthcare services but to the broader political debates shaping our society. For to modernise our services in a manner that sustains this central belief will strengthen not only the well-being of the British people but also the progressive character of the British nation itself.

Yet, in honouring the public service ethos, it is critical to be clear that institutions such as the NHS are not monuments to some imagined era of a better yesterday but part of a modern expression of a politically progressive society. We of course do not seek a society in which individual aspirations are denied; indeed, we believe in the empowerment of every individual. Yet, alongside this impulse, our capacity to work together to achieve mutually beneficial objectives must be acknowledged.

The capacity for progressive politics to serve both individual and collective aspirations finds expression in such a national health service, which is tailored to meeting the needs of patients and also to improving the well-being of every citizen because we recognise the mutually beneficial effects of being a healthier nation. To that end, Labour politicians in Britain have already shown they understand that improving the services available to all patients will require both greater diversity and greater capacity of provision to meet the needs of every service user in today's Britain. The task of modernising our public services brings with it both policy and political challenges and we must address both if we are truly to uphold the public service ethos.

How can a public service ethos be sustained?

It is also clear there are important discussions to be taken forward about the public-health challenges facing our society. Issues as diverse as how to tackle obesity, cancer and heart disease; the opportunities and concerns around gene therapy and modern scientific research; and the provision of public services in an era of "self-authorship" already pose questions around service provision to which the NHS is critical in answering. At the heart of our response to each of these challenges – and to ultimately providing a modern public health service – must be an understanding of how individual policies advance and sustain a public service ethos.

In the postwar period when the NHS was set up, the major killers British society faced were tuberculosis, whooping cough and smallpox. While we have recently seen the

reappearance of tuberculosis, the modern-day major diseases we ask our public health-care services to address are cancer, heart disease and depression, which require a greater involvement of the patient to prevent, treat and even cure. These require not just service expertise but personal commitment in order to be tackled. So too, in the face of increasing technological innovation around genetics and the capacity of private companies to identify who is at risk of particular diseases, progressives need to uphold the notion that every person deserves healthcare all of the time, rather than some of the people, some of the time, depending on their DNA analysis. This can only be enhanced with a public discourse in which each of us recognises our responsibility not just to ourselves but to each other, to ensure resources within the NHS are used to the greatest good of all.

The public service ethos can also help the Labour movement earn the support of modern generations for a national healthcare service free at the point of need, as an expression of the kind of community Britain wishes to be in the future. In relation to modern economies, Zuboff & Maxmin argue⁴⁷ that the public increasingly seeks more than the best price for goods and services; quality is instead measured by whether the service enhances the individual's sense of worth. Uniquely, a public service ethos can bring this sense of value to public service provision in modern society. Indeed, modernity is increasingly characterised by a desire for greater autonomy and greater control over the decisions affecting the lives of every individual.

The concept of the public service ethos allows us to develop a narrative about the aspirations we have for ourselves, which can be furthered through collective action so that each of us seeks the best service not just for ourselves but for our society. Without this, we run the risk of diminishing the potential of collective action to improve services – making the ballot box a complaints desk rather than an opportunity to vote for a different kind of society.

The complexity of responding to a growing desire for autonomy is not a new problem for Labour – 50 years ago Michael Young warned⁴⁸ about the need to ensure that people saw public services as something done not to them but with them. He too was challenged by the difficulties of delivering universal services for all in a way that would meet with individual needs. At its best, in its approach to public services, the left has always understood the balance to be struck between the individual and the community to which

47 Zuboff, S, Maxmin, J *The Support Economy: Why Corporations Are Failing Individuals & the Next Episode of Capitalism* (Penguin Books, London, 2004)

48 Young, M *The Chipped White Cups Of Dover* (1960)

individuals belong. To take a contemporary example: as the capacity of the NHS grows, so too does the scope for greater choice for individual patients.

Within public services, there is a role not only for choice but also for voice – it strengthens services if users have the ability not just to choose between them but also to work with them to create improvements. As Labour seeks to make services more personally tailored to patients, it is clear that the ability to make their voices heard in order for services to be able to respond can be a critical motor of service improvement. In its modes of operation, progressive politics – whether it be through trade unions, co-operatives or mutual societies – has always embodied the simple truth that the more voices are heard, the stronger the force they become, able to speak up for otherwise voiceless members of society. Our challenge in the years to come is therefore not only to acknowledge the autonomy, the diversity and the demand for self-authored lives that are the hallmarks of modern Britain. It is to do so in a way that does not deny that public services, and indeed ultimately the condition of society, are a tangible expression of a shared humanity as much as individual aspirations.

Finally, it is clear that, in these debates on the future of the NHS, the public service ethos provides a compass by which to navigate discussions and decisions on the role of markets, on the contribution of staff, on patient accountability and indeed the future of service provision. There is a wide acceptance that traditional forms of service organisation are no longer able to fully utilise the talents and experience of both service providers and service users. We recognise there are a range of skills and experiences across society and across services which are a huge resource to be cultivated. By grounding these discussions in a recognition of the value of the public service ethos, every facet of the debate can become an opportunity to strengthen the already considerable relationship of trust between users and deliverers, between the public and their institutions.

Establishing the public service ethos as the core of our vision of the future of the NHS opens up the opportunity to move the debate about public service provision on from the specifics of policy alone to a more holistic view of what public provision of services offers modern Britain. It offers us a compelling narrative about the value of progressive political ideals to modern society and how this translates into public institutions. It can also help to guide the continuing programme of reform and investment in public services to ensure that these reforms are focused on advancing a progressive vision of the good society.

Family and community life

If the provision of a national health service has resulted in passionate debates within the Labour movement about the practicalities of our policy, discussion of progressive hopes and aspirations for family and community life have been, in contrast, muted. Yet, just as there is a need to speak to the moral principles behind our approach to public services as a compass for change, so too we should speak up for a progressive world-view on one of the key social and cultural bonds of society. Many on the left have shied away from discussing a progressive conception of the family and community relationships and defining what role progressive governance can play in supporting these social bonds, for fear that it will be interpreted as interfering in the private lives of individuals. Yet we know too that the family, the workplace, the neighbourhood and the dense network of civic and voluntary institutions that make up society are not indifferent to equality, but integral. They are threads of the social fabric that profoundly affect life chances.

The Archbishop of Canterbury was right in his recent Reith lecture⁴⁹ to highlight the importance of these social bonds, but wrong to see them as wholly beyond the remit of the political process. Seeking to create a more equal society involves acknowledging the influence of those structures and organisations apparently outside politics which give meaning to people's lives, and asking how best to support and sustain these relationships in a way that advances our vision of the good society. Indeed, it is often through the family, congregation or voluntary group that we can learn the rights and responsibilities which are the foundations of a progressive conception of social justice.

Clearly, politicians have to tread carefully in such discussions because of the importance of the issues at stake. While we are familiar with the policy levers of economic intervention, attempted community building by central government has in the past proved both complex and challenging. The delicate social relationships that nourish family and community activity demand sensitivity and clarity in both the policy and the politics we offer. It is important to acknowledge frankly that a progressive conception of family and community life differs in important respects from the approach taken by many on the right. Indeed, without a competing and compelling narrative, there is a danger that only those on the right will attempt to define what family and community life should be in a modern Britain.

49 Rev R Williams, "The Burden of Choice", Reith lecture, BBC One, December 2002, as quoted in Bamfield, L *Life Chances: The New Politics of Equality in Family Fortunes: The New Politics of Childhood* (Fabian Society pamphlet 613, 2004)

On the left we understand that family circumstances, more than any other factor, have the biggest impact on the life chances offered in our society to every child. The experience of poverty in childhood in our nation is one of the greatest affronts to progressive politics. It is not just around financial matters that families play a critical role. Particularly in the era of the knowledge economy, the role that families play in securing the education attainment of their members makes them a matter of central concern for those keen to see a society in which every child is genuinely afforded the chance to realise their potential.

Our commitment to investment and raising standards in schools must be part of a broader agenda which recognises the sometimes multiple barriers to achievement still faced by many children. By the time they are six years old, children from more affluent backgrounds who demonstrated lesser ability⁵⁰ as infants have overtaken children from disadvantaged backgrounds who demonstrated higher ability. It is our sense of anger about these enduring injustices that drives our policy-making decisions and also helps to define the ethical core of our politics.

Thus, ours is a perspective rooted in a determination to tackle such inequalities. We recognise that supporting families is an integral part of creating a fairer, more socially just nation. Yet winning this argument requires us also to tackle those debates that are underpinned by the thorny, culturally held views about the boundary between public and private life. As we enter into these at times difficult debates we must also acknowledge that family life is rightly guarded by all as a precious institution that is to be strengthened not subjugated.

Finding a way of addressing these issues is not a matter of simply and unthinkingly accepting the terms of the debate set by the right. Instead, we can draw on a progressive vision of the appropriate role of political parties and so focus not on family structure but on family need. By concentrating on the values that, at their best, the social bonds of families express, rather than on particular structures of family life, we can challenge the common conception that a concern for family life is simply a code for either homogeneity or moralising. So too, it is a way of widening the debate around parenting, from discussion of the difficulties or disadvantages faced to a deeper recognition of how important parenting is as a contribution to the life of a child and the wider society.

50 As quoted in Bamfield L. *Life Chances : The New Politics of Equality* in *Family Fortunes: The New Politics of Childhood* Fabian Society pamphlet 613 2004

For the left, upholding the importance of family life is about supporting people as they seek to support each other; because we recognise that it is the realm in which we first learn the duties, rights and responsibilities of humanity. Furthermore, in a progressive society, the concern we have for our fellow human beings is not limited to our relatives and does not end at our own front doors. Indeed, the work on international development described earlier shows how, as a society, we are capable of acknowledging our shared humanity across the world as well as in our own nation. Looked at this way, communities are the end point of a process that starts with a strong family unit, grounded not in contractual relationships but in a commitment to love and support every member equally.

The moral impulse this belief gives to progressive policy making is clear. Emerging plans for childcare and family life are deliberately designed to extend the frontiers of the welfare state so that children have the resources and opportunities they require to achieve their potential. The new steps being taken are aimed at ensuring every family can make the choices that suit their needs around balancing work and family life. The Child Trust Fund and the new proposals on extending parental leave reflect a greater concern for and interest in the needs of the youngest members of our society and their parents. Extending school opening hours and children's centres across the country; increasing the number of free hours of childcare available per week; making available 1 million extra childcare places by 2010; and ensuring that many more parents will also get £50 per week help with their childcare costs through employer-supported childcare would represent a fundamental transformation in the capacity of our society to support children and families in modern Britain.

The thinking behind these measures reveals how the left can recognise that the structures of private lives are a matter for the individuals concerned, but also positively argue that the state can make a contribution to meeting the needs of families for the benefit of wider society. Making these plans a reality requires both support for the necessary policy steps and the political decisions and debates that must take place if we are to achieve the next steps towards securing the aim of universal childcare for all children. Measures such as Sure Start prioritise family connections, but they are rooted in our belief that families are the core to sustaining the wider community.

Navigating this difficult social territory in a way which accords with our commitment to equality and social justice requires not just that politicians speak up for the moral impulse behind their work but also a national conversation about the kind of future we want to create. Defining how progressive values should be put into practice in relation to family

and community life can only be achieved through democratic and open debate; a discussion about the values of our vision of the good society in which every citizen is listened to and considered. It is difficult territory for politicians, but the ability of politics to offer a space for the debate, discussion and resolution of these issues is the primary way in which such a discourse can be created whose outcome benefits the most vulnerable sections of society.

The ambitions and dreams we have for the years ahead most often start with our families and our local community. Thus, in speaking up for how we view community and family life, a new progressive consensus on the need to support family life can be built. In turn, the values inculcated by family and community – such as hard work, personal responsibility, concern for others and integrity – are not only personal attributes. Their benefits spill over into our national identity and the British social fabric, and in turn support and sustain progressive politics.

As these examples have shown, the moral impulse underlying progressive policy development is the key not only to public support but also to progressive change itself. The need for this support goes beyond its capacity to motivate people to vote at the ballot box. This is not a politics rooted in a narrow vision of the ability of the market to resolve all contemporary issues, but a politics whose expansive vision of the good society requires communication and social interaction as well as policy in order to succeed.

Given this, and the case made here for making explicit the moral values which are the petrol in the tank of such political activity, the final question facing Labour is, can it speak up for the politics and the policies which make real such an ethical dimension? Having shown here in these three examples the power of the moral arguments behind our politics, the final chapter will consider the difficulties in making our case for a progressive future for Britain.

Chapter 5

Revitalising the public realm – securing a new approach to politics

Revitalising the public realm – securing a new approach to politics

David Marquand argues⁵¹ that the failure of previous Labour governments was to focus only on “mechanical” reform to deliver services, and thus undermine the very civic entities on which those services depended, by failing to shape the “moral” values of a “Labour England”. Marquand writes:

We create communities by practising the habits of community: we acquire citizenship by acting as citizens ... These values cannot be taught. They can only be learned in use.

Implicit so far in this paper has been the need for Labour to put its politics not only into practice but also into words. Progressive politics thrives not just on participation in elections but also through participation by all in the discussions, debates and decisions that shape the future.

This requires us to have a public space in which information and ideas can be explored and examined and in which participants are free from fear of reprisals and confident in the knowledge they will be heard. Put simply, a progressive vision of the good society involves not just a majority within parliament to operate effectively but a thriving civic culture in which every member of society feels able to contribute.

Increasingly, there is evidence that our capacity to talk about the moral choices we face as a society and how to achieve such a culture is diminishing. The corrosion of the public realm described in chapter three challenges progressive politics more than any particular policy perspective in the UK. We know that the British people share our values and our ideals for the kind of future they desire. Furthermore, we recognise that progressive political thought has always been given voice through a multitude of entities – be it in pressure groups, trade unions or co-operatives – many of which are currently thriving. However, without a progressive political party to speak for these values in a democratic society, they cannot flourish.

The continued interest in political issues and the growth of pressure-group politics described in chapter three shows that this trend is not apathy – a term which implicitly blames the voter by suggesting they cannot be bothered. Rather, it is the very capacity of political

51 Marquand, D *The Progressive Dilemma* (William Heinemann, 1999)

parties to be a conduit for political idealism and the political process itself that is being questioned. This, then, is a clear barrier to expressing the moral impulse critical to our politics.

It will not be enough for us to have the right policies and the right arguments for progressive change. If we are unable to counteract the rising tide of disengagement and disconnection from the public realm, this severely threatens our capacity to win the arguments for a progressive future. Meeting the challenge of disengagement outlined in chapter three requires us to offer not just a new approach to language but, ultimately, a new vision of politics.

Of course, the issue of voter disengagement is not a new concern for British progressive politics and there has been much contemporary debate around this issue already. Yet, while it is right to look at whether further constitutional reform may help revitalise the public realm, ultimately voting is and will remain a political act. Thus, first and foremost, low voter turnout must be challenged by high public purpose, starting with the need to reaffirm the distinctive claims of politics and political parties. To do this we need to challenge the fatalism surrounding political institutions which exists at all levels – local, national and international – because it dampens expectations of what can be achieved.

The aim must be to create a civic culture in which the public asks more, not less, of its politicians because there is a recognition that politics is not simply – not even mainly – a professional activity performed by full-time politicians, aides and civil servants. It is a necessary series of mediations in social and economic life – the more freely engaged in, the more often and the more widely spread the better. It operates at the level of local problems, projects and proposals; it operates at the level of national and global movements, agreements and conflicts. It requires all of these levels. No alternative system to representative politics, based on competing parties, has appeared which can lay convincing claim to underpin both stable democracy and stable government.

The challenge of effective communication

The present public realm and the desire for self-authorship and autonomy also present a fundamental challenge to the way in which political parties operate. In particular, they create a practical challenge to our capacity to reach out and debate with the public the future direction of the nation. This, ultimately, threatens the ability of the Labour movement to communicate our defining narratives in a way that can bring together a sustained coalition of support and membership, which sustains a potent progressive presence in British politics.

The challenge is to develop the capacity to express narratives in a way that allows us to argue and persuade people of the case for a progressive future. This requires ways of communicating which reach and extend far beyond Westminster. These must be rooted in everyday life and allow a proper, sustained debate and discussion of the issues in question. It is incumbent on the Labour movement as a whole to seek dialogues with the public about where their values and their specialist interests connect with ours – and where they don't – to show how politics provides the means and the method by which shared solutions can be reached.

The progressive belief in the capacity of the public realm to become a conduit for our vision of the good society raises the question of how to achieve more permanent changes to revitalise the public realm. Indeed, while elections can provide a window of opportunity during which interest in politics tends to be higher, they cannot and should not be the sole focus of a progressive and thriving civic culture. This means making real the political content of everyday life; instead of politics shrinking into a four-yearly choice between political parties, the aim should be to broaden the political conversation to encompass not just the government but the structures and organisations that give meaning to people's lives. The public realm is not simply the arena of politicians talking to one another; it is a shared forum for the resolution of the problems we as a society face together.

This recognition that equality demands all citizens be heard means we must extend our gaze beyond traditional political institutions such as parliaments or town halls, and traditional methods such as ballot boxes, to ask how else can be built an inclusive democracy in which debate, discussion and decision making prosper. The question is now to find the appropriate level at which citizens can come together to solve the problems they face – be it through local councils, national government or school boards – and how we can support this process to ensure equal influence to all. Accompanying this must be a narrative that upholds the importance not only of politicians and representative democracy but also of participatory democracy as a goal in itself. Without equal, open and everyday participation in decision-making processes, the danger is that those with money and inherited power will dictate outcomes, making inequality perpetual.

Finally, developing a narrative about civic engagement could also help revitalise the work of political parties. Party members and their commitment to shared values and beliefs are not an added bonus but the integral starting point for the capacity of a political movement to reach out into wider society. While the Republicans ran an effective national campaign, the size of their victory in 2004 was achieved not simply on national television

ads or radio spots but in conversations on doorsteps, at the school gates, at the church door or even online. To that end, the ability of the Labour movement to make the case for progressive politics will, ultimately, depend both on conventional political communications and on our ability to sustain and widen a shared conversation with the British people. Complementing this recognition at a national level of the need to change the way in which we operate must therefore be a reaffirmation of the importance of local constituency parties and members in the Labour movement.

In particular, Labour must continue to work to reconcile the need for coherence and credibility in the policy pronouncements of a party that aspires to government with the need to fully engage as wide a group of members as possible in the policy-making process. People join political parties not simply to deliver leaflets but do so because they share the values of the party on whose behalf they are active. Honouring that commitment to a shared set of values requires more than leaflet rounds; as a political movement we must work together to advance an inclusive and open policy-making process and political dialogue which maintains party membership as a way of contributing towards a progressive future for Britain.

At the same time, we know that were the Labour movement to talk only to itself, it could not hope to lead the necessary debates within the wider society for progressive politics. Anyone who has sat through evenings in cold community centres at constituency Labour Party general committee meetings that struggle to be quorate, or who has tried to motivate their colleagues to give up a Saturday afternoon to go to a conference, would recognise that the structures through which parties are currently organised do not always fit the society in which we live. As a starting point to determining the changes required, being clearer about why politics matters will also help us to identify how to respond to these issues as a political movement.

Conclusion

The challenges to progressive politics

Conclusion: The challenges to progressive politics

For decades, the perceived wisdom was that politics was a choice between head and heart – between a right that was competent but uncaring and a left that was socially compassionate but economically unreliable. In the past decade, the Labour Party in government has proved itself economically proficient. However, in this new climate, the test for progressive politics is higher than it has ever been before – financial competency is a necessary but not sufficient claim to power. Instead, our challenge now is to refashion the political debates in which we participate so that we can make plain the moral impulse that defines progressive politics. We must recognise that the electorate wants to know that we are both economically able and values-driven – to feel an affinity with both our policies and our politics.

The vibrancy of the moral core from which progressive politics springs has, throughout the Labour movement's history, changed the course of British society. From the National Health Service to the changing aspirations for international development, progressive politics at its best has brought the people of this country together in a shared sense of purpose; the purpose of building a better society for all, rooted in the values of equality, solidarity and social justice. In turn, these progressive achievements have rooted themselves within British society, becoming irreversible hallmarks of the kind of nation we wish to become. In this process we can see that the moral impulse of progressive politics acts as a catalyst to building and sustaining the progressive consensus such political changes require.

There is an alternative analysis of political change, which others offer to the British people. It springs from a political discourse that denies the role of politics and public life. It finds support in those who collapse into a sense of hopelessness about the capacity of humanity to alter its condition, because of the complexities of the modern world. Such an approach, however, can only benefit those forces of reaction that see government simply as a hindrance to the power of the market to deliver their vision of the future. In contrast, the Labour movement and the progressive politics it upholds and policies it entails are nurtured by a belief that, rightly directed, the power of government can be a vital force for good. In a time when there is high interest in political issues such as international affairs and international development, disengagement from political parties can only damage the opportunity for the left to achieve the progressive consensus about the future of Britain which is potentially within our grasp.

It is difficult at times to stand aside from fashionable cynicism and to be politically engaged; to show a willingness to take responsibility for decisions about the future direction of British society. Yet, for progressives, the failure to address these issues would do more than limit our ability to put across our message. Indeed, this pamphlet has shown the danger such a situation presents to progressive politics. Without a public realm in which to have debates such as those discussed in the previous chapter, the arguments for a progressive future will never be made, let alone heard and enacted. To fail to uphold the capacity of politics and political entities to provide leadership and direction, whether on a national or international level, would be detrimental to progressive politics.

The years ahead are an opportunity for the Labour movement to make real the moral impulse that defines progressive politics. This is not simply about talking up the work of the Labour government so far. Those political parties which have succeeded in this ambition have become more than governments, they have become movements that sustain their political values well beyond the lifetime of one parliament. The British people, who rely on the achievement of a progressive future, need and deserve nothing less.

*Every generation is in part united, and in part inspired, by some conception of a better and more just society. The conception varies from age to age, and reflects in large measure the peculiar needs and the dominant philosophy of the times in which it forms ... As I move about this island, in its quiet lanes and in its crowded streets, meeting people of all classes and persuasions, I feel the life of a strong and quiet people about me; more deeply united than they realise, more creative than they ever suspect. Here, if anywhere, the will for the common good is strong. From it and from the common friendliness we bear to one another we can continue to make, if we will, a society of which all men will be glad. – Evan Durbin, *The Politics of Democratic Socialism* (1945)*