

# Editorial

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As we head towards the election it is worth reminding ourselves that political settlements are never stable. They are always contested and require constant shoring up and adjustment. At certain moments the contestations become sharper and more visible, and these are times when there is perhaps the possibility of a new settlement. But, as Gramsci pointed out, during such periods the currently dominant political forces work very hard to preserve and defend the existing structures, partly through trying to heal the rifts that have opened up - though within certain limits.<sup>1</sup>

In his 'reflections on the present', Mike Rustin discusses differences and similarities between the current financial crisis and the last major period of upheaval in British politics - the 1970s - when, after a period of struggle, Thatcherism defeated the left and put in place a settlement based on what we have come to know as neoliberalism. The key difference Mike identifies is that the current crisis is the result of neoliberalism collapsing under its own contradictions; there has not been a major political battle with a strongly backed alternative to challenge dominant narratives. This weakness on the left is part of the bitter harvest of New Labour's inability to tackle vested interests and assert a social democratic leadership. New Labour has actively enabled, or been content to preside over, the continuing destruction of the forces that might have been marshalled to challenge neoliberalism. As Jeremy Gilbert pointed out in his contribution to last year's Progressive Futures debate, New Labour in office has continued to undermine trade unions, failed to preserve democratic media, carried on the privatisation of the public sector and weakened local government - and in so doing helped to consolidate the Thatcherite defeat of the left.<sup>2</sup> This makes it more difficult to mobilise behind alternative solutions to the current financial collapse.

What we are seeing at the moment are efforts by all the main political parties to address the current crisis through what John Clarke describes in his contribution as a 'restorationist' strategy. John argues that we are currently experiencing multiple crises, and multiple interpretations of those crises. There is intense competition 'to name the crisis, to identify its distinctive characteristics and treat it as the ground on which to demand new ways of doing things'. At the moment, the minimalist interpretation of what has gone wrong is prevailing; the main remedy on offer is a quick fix of the finance system before resuming business as usual. Rather than taking the measure of the underlying causes of the financial breakdown - not to mention

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the other potential disasters we are facing, most notably climate change - the aim is to restore the status quo ante. But, as John also points out, the current crisis is much deeper than such strategies would imply. It represents the unravelling of many elements of the neoliberal settlement. Even if the 'restorationists' win a temporary reprieve with an adjusted but similar settlement, they will not be able to resolve the problems of a global economy that can no longer be fuelled by consumer debt, or a political settlement based on satisfying western consumers (and thereby destroying the planet). There are some signs within the Labour Party of people struggling to come to terms with this, but the dominant narrative is one of continuing as before.

In his review Jonathan Rutherford discusses New Labour restorationists' efforts to reinvigorate liberal market rhetoric through drawing on Amartya Sen's humane liberalism. Unfortunately, though they share in Sen's difficulty in acknowledging the underlying causes of inequality, the humanity part seems to go out of the window when it comes to policy. This is particularly evident in their approach to welfare, where structural causes of inequality are denied, and an increasing emphasis is placed on people's responsibility for their own problems. But triangulation beefed up with Sen is not going to be enough to revive Labour. Unless they recognise the much deeper problems we face, they will continue to destroy themselves - as well as the possibility of finding an alternative and sustainable future.

Several contributors in this issue discuss areas where dominant narratives are simply inadequate. Mark Perryman documents the inability of the main UK parties to understand the processes set in train by devolution. The social democratic alternatives to Labour that have been embodied in the civic nationalism of major parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, are dismissed as irrelevant; they have not provoked any self-criticism, or rethinking about the potentially fruitful intersections between national identity and progressive politics. Roshi Naidoo shows how the narrow instrumentalism of Labour's arts policies risks undermining the hard-won gains of black cultural activists. The participants in our discussion on climate change point to the immense gap between the change that is needed and government rhetoric.

Of course the Conservatives have nothing to offer on these issues - they remain a committed unionist party; their arts policy is oblivious to equality issues; and their approach to climate change is hamstrung by their general unwillingness to regulate. As George Monbiot puts it: 'The Tory party ... wildly over-emphasise the potential of micro-generation because (a) their members hate wind farms and (b) it's something

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you can do for yourself. It reflects the whole individualised, atomised approach to dealing with problems'. The tragedy for the left is that the Labour Party cannot or will not push forward its own alternative.

Julian Petley tells a salutary tale of New Labour in his discussion of the history of Human Rights Act of 1998. First a progressive and modernising piece of legislation was introduced with great caution and much apology; then its provisions were indiscriminately undermined through authoritarian legislation; then the government joined in with the populist discourses that were denigrating its own legislation; and finally they became almost indistinguishable from the Tories in calling for new, modifying, legislation in which the emphasis had shifted onto rights being earned - or, as they put it, balanced with responsibilities. In the meantime the government had strongly resisted the possibility that the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights might give British citizens any further rights - hence the UK opt-out. Julian quotes Jack Straw's assurance to the CBI: the government puts 'the interests of business at the heart of its negotiating position' with the EU; and 'we will insist that ... the charter of fundamental rights and responsibilities creates no new rights under national law, so as not to upset the balance of Britain's industrial relations policy'.

Business as usual is not an adequate response to the current global crisis. The left needs to intervene to seek a new political settlement, and to make every effort to put forward a compelling alternative narrative that can sustain a new alliance for change

Elsewhere in the issue, John Grahl offers an interesting alternative on EU and monetary policy, in his suggestion that we join the EMU and simultaneously try to reform it. Andrew Sayer reflects on what a truly egalitarian policy on work would look like. Ben Carrington shows the way race is being mobilised to undermine Barack Obama's efforts to change America. Glyn Ford describes the unhelpfulness of western policy towards North Korea. And Sayeed Khan tells the story of the continuing disastrous failure of the political class in Pakistan to grasp the nettle of democratic reform.

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## Notes

1. This passage is quoted by Mike Rustin in his article, see p30.
2. See [www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/progressive\\_futures/article17.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/progressive_futures/article17.html).