

Editorial

Speaking for England

In this issue we continue discussion on a number of themes that are critical to rethinking left strategy and developing opposition to Coalition government policies - extending democracy across the regions and nations of the UK, a new welfare settlement, and a new political economy.

Our first three articles explore Englishness, regionalism and localism. As Paul Salvesson argues, reconnecting with local and regional traditions of socialism is a crucial way of renewing left politics all around the country, as well as feeding into the national renewal that is so needed. And at the same time getting back in touch with local socialist traditions meshes naturally with the rethinking on Englishness that Anthony Painter is calling for. For it is in the regions that people are most likely to find their sense of place and identity.

All this points to the strong connections between issues of Englishness and democracy: and as Ken Spours argues, there is a socialist politics of localism that offers an alternative to New Labour's centralising tendencies while also rejecting the Tories' idea of a small (and therefore non-redistributive) central state. If we can revive a distinctive socialist take on local politics, at the same time as rethinking the distribution of decision-making between the centre and the regions, we will have gone along way towards beginning a national renewal of the left, while also making a major contribution to twenty-first century thinking on Englishness.

The next three articles continue our discussion on the public sphere, and in particular our efforts to alert readers to the massive withdrawal of support by the government for those living with incapacity or disability. Kaliya Franklin and Sue Marsh spell out this withdrawal in a frighteningly long list of benefits that the government is either reducing drastically or dropping all together. As they argue, at the same time as the government is urging the disabled to seek employment, it is taking away all the supports people need in order to be able to work. Declan Gaffney points out that neither the previous New Labour government nor the present

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Coalition seem to be able to come to terms with the idea that a normally functioning welfare state will always need to provide for people who are either temporarily out of work, or prevented from working by sickness or disability. As he demonstrates, current levels of incapacity benefit payments reflect the numbers of people living with incapacity. And yet on all sides we find resistance to looking after people in need disguising itself as a quest to weed out 'scroungers'.

This fundamental move away from a recognition that the state has an important role to play in looking after people is also affecting women disproportionately. As the Feminist Fightback Collective point out, the effect of draconian cuts across a whole range of services that contribute both to sustaining existing citizens and nurturing those of the future is to re-privatise women's work; and such an attempt to return to the good old-fashioned ways overlooks the fact that most women with children now also must have jobs outside the home, in order to be able to survive financially.

The last five articles continue the search for a new political economy. Andrea Westall argues that relational economics - which recognises that the economy is based in relationships, networks and connections - is a fruitful way of avoiding a one-size-fits-all mindset on the economy. As well as offering an important corrective to market fundamentalism, this is also an approach the left could usefully adopt. Michael Burke shows conclusively that shrinking the public sector is bad for the economy, since, as recent UK figures show, private investment follows on from public-sector-led recovery; as long as households and the government are not spending or borrowing to spend, the private sector is unlikely to invest in producing goods for them to buy. Paul Everitt puts the case for manufacturers: he hopes he detects in the government's rhetoric on manufacturing a recognition that the economy needs to be rebalanced away from finance. Mariana Mazzucato discusses yet another area where dogma has prevented acknowledgement of the role of the state - the sphere of innovation, in which the large scale risk-taking that is required for major technological breakthroughs is almost never undertaken by private capital. Finally, Stewart Lansley demolishes the myth that free market capitalism has been good for the economy over the last thirty years, by showing that on almost all counts the post-war era of 'managed capitalism' outperforms the later period.

In the year ahead *Soundings* will be analysing and developing central themes in society, the economy and culture, to help create a Labour revival, and a new political strategy for the left.