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The search for a 'We'

The right has a definition. Social democracy is still struggling to find an answer. Andy Burnham could change that

Back in July 2024, Keir Starmer's Labour Party was elected with a landslide majority. Starmer promised a two-term project to transform the country: a 'decade of national renewal'. Two years later, off the back of disastrous local election results, with the radical right Reform UK leading in the polls, he was out.

The concern here should be less with the well-trodden ground of the personal limitations and policy missteps which led to Starmer's failure, than with what his ill-fated premiership tells us about the wider state of progressive politics. Not long ago it was possible, after all, to see Starmer as part of an unlikely wave of the future: the rise of the boring social democrat, as a group of late middle-aged, rather grey men (Biden, Scholz, Albanese), lacking in obvious charisma or 'star power', took office. The 2010s had witnessed a widespread crisis of social democracy, seemingly necessitating profound ideological reinvention. But now, very conventional leaders were winning on equally conventional social-democratic platforms. None appeared especially radical, yet each championed at least a partial reversion to a social-democratic interventionism discarded in the 'Third Way' era: bolder industrial policy, stronger employment rights, more explicit rhetorical appeals to class. (There were of course marked differences – not least in their relative political acumen.) For all: Biden, Scholz, and now Starmer, this strategy did not pay off, seeming less as a wave of the future, and more as symptoms of progressive parties' backward-looking defensive posture, their estrangement from younger progressive voters, and their kneejerk institutionalism. Starmer in particular struggled to articulate who or what his government was for; as a result, he alienated everyone.

These men, then, appear emblematic of the centre-left's exhaustion after the Third Way. The ideological changes that centre-left parties underwent in the 1990s and 2000s were largely necessary responses to cultural, economic and social changes: deindustrialisation, globalisation, and ordinary people's increasing desire to shape their own lives and

identities. For a time, they proved an extraordinary recipe for electoral success and progressive change, as social democrats reached out beyond their (increasingly post-) working-class base to 'aspirational' middle-class voters. They rode the wave of global economic integration, the rising 'knowledge economy' and relative geopolitical stability – directing the proceeds of growth into social investment. But the price that had to be payed was an acceleration of social-democratic parties' detachment from their ideological and sociological moorings.

Fighting losing battles

After the 2008 financial crisis, this all came apart. Its aftermath exposed political parties that no longer had a clear idea of their constituency, or their overriding purpose, in societies that no longer conformed to their twentieth-century mental maps. Economically, progressives could no longer rely on consistent, non-inflationary growth to drive rising living standards and resource lavish increases in social expenditure. Culturally, discourses of freedom and interconnection ceded to those of security and belonging – a shift underlined by the Brexit vote. Global interconnectedness became associated with the transmission of economic crises and pandemics, while liberal institutions came under increasing strain. Societies continued to become more diverse and plural, as social media dramatically amplified processes of social and political fragmentation that were a marked feature of the late twentieth century. The biggest profiteers were radical right parties appealing to national sovereignty and restoration in response to intersecting social, economic, and cultural crises. While the radical right promises a return to a unitary vision of the nation – often based on ethnicity – which never really existed, the left struggles to define the community to whom a more just social contract should apply.

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Social-democratic parties strain to speak to many audiences and, too often, they satisfy few. Younger, progressive voters (particularly private renters) peel off to left parties that speak with greater clarity and conviction about economic, social and international injustice, while once safe 'heartland' constituencies shift rightwards. Class still matters, even if it has changed. But there is not a future for progressives in appealing to a vision of class that belongs to a different time, or in clinging to the hope that some more jobs in manufacturing sectors which today employ relatively few, high-skill workers, will restore bygone sociopolitical certainties. Rather,

progressives will have to offer a broad national appeal, which accounts for the greater pluralism of contemporary societies.

Progressives' crowning twentieth-century achievements broadened and deepened citizenship: extending the full status of citizenship to previously excluded groups and expanding the shared rights, responsibilities, and institutions which comprise citizenship. But in Britain, debate about citizenship has been allowed to narrow to a question of its boundaries: who can come, who can stay, who is eligible for welfare benefits. Starmer's government too had little to say on what it means to belong, beyond the raising of barriers to migrants to 'earn' settlement.

Progressives must recognise that this leaves them fighting a losing battle on the terrain of the radical right. They will have to offer a much more ambitious argument about what it means to belong. In the UK, that should mean democratic reform to maximise participation, end the fiction that Britain's plural society can be somehow expressed through a highly centralised, winner-takes-all political system, and mend the broken trust between politics and the people. That could include proportional representation, Australian-style compulsory voting, and residence-based voting in local elections. It should involve a meaningful agenda to restrain the influence of oligarchic interests in our politics – particularly given the disturbing alliances taking shape between the radical right and new, extractive forms of private power. It should mean much bigger thinking about new institutions which might embody forms of economic and social citizenship. And it must mean being willing to make a big argument tying these things together: that citizenship is something rooted not in blood, but in living together in a place, recognising certain common rights and obligations, and participating in common institutions.

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Starmer's successor, Andy Burnham, has made a promising start, thanks in part to his aptitude for new media. But the test of his premiership will be how he manages to reconcile the immediate-term policy dilemmas he has inherited, which hemmed in his predecessor, with attention to the long-term vision he has begun to elaborate: a radical decentralisation of political power, 'public control' of 'life's essentials', significant democratic reform, and reform of Britain's dysfunctional social care settlement. There is an argument here which

could provide the seeds of an ambitious political project: that the centralisation of political power and the privatisation of economic power in the UK went hand-in-hand, that together they profoundly disempowered ordinary people and produced a justified distrust of government by the governed, and that the solution can only lie through some combination of economic radicalism *and* political reform. Burnham's devolutionist instincts at least hint at a recognition that both identity and power in a modern nation must necessarily be polyvalent and plural.

The test, though, will be whether Burnham can harness these arguments to a bigger vision – one that goes beyond nostalgia for social democracy's past – about national belonging as something grounded in contribution and common life. That will mean discovering a greater willingness than his predecessor to consistently and confidently take on and defeat the far right's exclusive, ethnic vision of belonging.



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