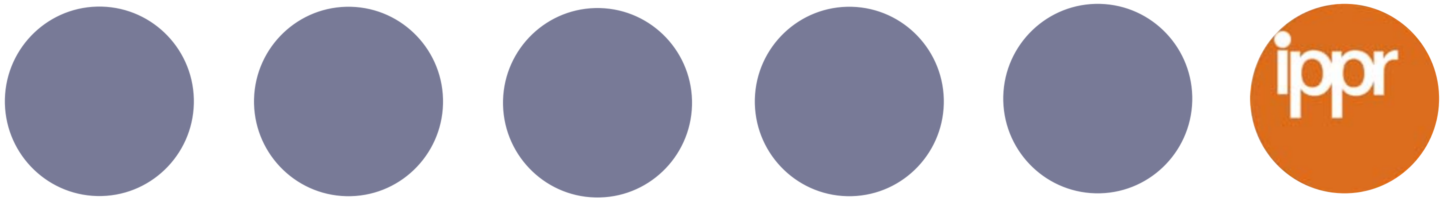

A New Agenda

Labour and democracy

Michael Wills

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30-32 Southampton Street, London WC2E 7RA
Tel: 020 7470 6100 Fax: 020 7470 6111 www.ippr.org
Registered Charity No. 800065

About the author

Michael Wills was a television producer before being elected as the MP for North Swindon in 1997. He was a Minister in the Department of Trade and Industry, Department for Education and Employment, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Home Office before resigning in July 2003.

Labour and Democracy: a new agenda

This essay is a contribution to the debate about the Left's future. It argues that the circumstances that have sustained Labour for so long are evaporating and that the Government requires radical renewal to win a fourth term. And it suggests a starting point for that long and difficult process.

It is morally imperative that Labour continues to deliver on its agenda of attacking poverty, providing pathways into employment for those who can work and decent support for those who cannot, investing for world-class public services, and sustaining the conditions for economic growth and stability that make all this possible.

But this essay argues that the political conditions for taking this agenda forward are changing. Although the vision put forward in 1997 remains essential for the Left, it is evidently less attractive and compelling for increasing numbers of voters. That vision needs to be renewed to reach out to alienated voters.

And, it is argued, the starting point should be a shift of vision from economics to politics. The reinvigoration of democracy is important in its own right but it is also fundamental to labour's platform of economic and social justice. Increasingly, politicians must earn the right to be heard and not assume it. The left often argues that a cohesive community depends on equality. But this essay argues that egalitarian policies and a cohesive community depend on each other and that policies for economic and social justice cannot be sustained without political action to build a cohesive moral community.

If the left wants its message of justice to resonate more than it did in 2005, we have to start re-engaging with voters so that they listen when we talk about it. No matter how compelling the argument, if voters do not trust politicians and they do not want to believe us, then they won't listen to us. And if we cannot persuade them to do so, we let down the millions who depend on a labour government for justice and a better life.

This essay argues for a programme of reform, that may have to be driven not by the political class who are seen as responsible for undermining faith in our constitutional arrangements but by the people themselves who are served by such arrangements. It suggests that the time may be coming for an elected, one-off, fixed term constitutional convention to heal the fractures in our politics.

This is not a manifesto and the detailed proposals seeking support from voters for a renewed economic and social platform have still to be written. But it is an attempt to set a context for that manifesto, drawing throughout on my own experiences as the MP for North Swindon. Much of this essay will be criticised. My aim is not to avoid attack but to provoke debate. All I hope is that those who criticise will also seek to answer the question: if not this, then what?

Fed up

Voters have long left behind the passionate 1970s and 1980s and the optimism of 1997. Today they are sour and apathetic about most politicians. These are times of disillusion and disengagement. Just three per cent of those voting in European elections in 2004 in Swindon, the town that includes my constituency, were aged between 18 and 25.

Politicians are genetically programmed to seek succour from poor opinion polls (just snapshots at a point in time) or any individual local election results (low turn-out with no consequences for a general election) but they would be unwise to draw much consolation from the last definitive statement of electoral opinion. The 2005 General Election offered less comfort simultaneously to all the main parties contesting it than any election since the 19th century.

The result was desperately poor for the Conservatives. They went down to a third consecutive defeat, gaining just 33 seats while remaining still largely excluded from the great cities of England, Scotland and Wales. As Michael Ashcroft, the former Treasurer of the Conservative Party wrote in his cogent analysis of the 2005 Election: 'The problem was not that millions of people thought that the Conservative Party wasn't like them and didn't understand them: the problem was that they were right' (Ashcroft, 2005: 111).

The result was also bad for the Liberal Democrats. Despite trading off their opposition to the Iraq War and widespread dislike of both the other two main parties, they increased their parliamentary representation by

just 11 seats. They failed yet again to secure the promised breakthrough into becoming a credible alternative government.

But both Opposition parties have an excuse. They were confronting a government that, by any objective assessment, had delivered more for voters than any government for over fifty years: average real incomes up by 20 per cent (Humphrey, 2005), a doubling of investment in the NHS, waiting times cut by a third (Carvel, 2004), and 90,000 more young people getting five or more A*–C grades at GCSE (DfES, 2005).

It is more difficult for the Government to explain why, with such a strong record and in the face of an unpopular Opposition leader who ineluctably awakened memories of a disliked and discredited Tory regime, it only managed to secure just over a third of the popular vote and saw its majority reduced by 60 per cent. Moreover, with 101 of its seats possessing majorities of less than 5,000, it found itself vulnerable to any measurable advance by the Opposition at the next General Election. If fewer than 14,000 voters had switched from Labour to the Tories in key seats, the Government would have lost its majority.

What happened in the 2005 election?

If Labour is to win a fourth term, it needs to understand what happened in May 2005 and why. Four different explanations have been advanced, three of them dangerously misleading.

The first is that, far from being a bad result, it was an excellent one: an unprecedented third term, with a majority that, though reduced, was still healthy by historic standards. This, the argument goes, shows that significant numbers of voters remain enthusiastic about the Government's performance and many more believe it is doing its best to pursue an agenda which represents the wishes and aspirations of many, if not most, voters in the country. All that is true, of course, but it fails to provide any explanation for why Labour's support fell so dramatically even though the Government had delivered so much, so successfully.

The second explanation attributes responsibility to the war in Iraq and Tony Blair's conduct of it, in particular with the arguments over Weapons of Mass Destruction. This thesis is often developed to suggest that there has been a more general loss of trust in the Government, for which the Iraq War is largely, but not exclusively, responsible. Superficially this is more plausible. Such sentiments were widely voiced on the doorstep. In North Swindon, where my majority was slashed, canvassing returns suggested that around 2,500 voters switched from Labour to the Liberal Democrats and a further 1,000 previously Labour voters stayed at home because of their dislike of Tony Blair and the Iraq War, accounting for two-thirds of the reduction in the majority.

But closer scrutiny suggests that at the national level this may only be part of the explanation. Iraq and trust never appeared in any opinion poll as highly salient issues for most voters. Only six per cent of voters thought Iraq was the most important issue (Populus, 2005). Only 26 per cent of Labour identifiers who did not vote Labour cited Iraq as the reason (Byrne, 2005). Leaders rarely personally turn elections – Jim Callaghan's net satisfaction rating, for example, was 20 points ahead of Margaret Thatcher's in 1979. But even if it is argued, as appears to be the case, that the minority of voters who did care about Tony Blair's leadership and Iraq were those most likely to switch their vote, that can only be part of the explanation for Labour's performance. No party, no matter how successful its record, can avoid going into any election without carrying some negative baggage. The question in 2005 is not whether the Iraq War and Tony Blair were liabilities – clearly they were – but why such a successful government could not more successfully overcome such negatives.

Alongside the more immediate explanations of anger about Iraq and the tarnishing of Tony Blair, it is hard to avoid other reasons for our underwhelming performance: boredom and complacency. Important issues were at stake and voters should have been neither bored nor complacent, but too many were. Electoral Commission research found voters felt 'uninspired by the state of politics' and found the campaign 'lacklustre' (Electoral Commission, 2005). Such boredom is always likely to hurt an incumbent government most.

Familiarity, the tolls of office and the politics of contentment all help account for such weariness. After nine years in office and intense media scrutiny, it is not surprising voters should have become less interested in their government. The resentment against the last Tory government that propelled Labour into power in 1997 is inevitably fading. Most first time voters in 2005 had not even started school when Mrs Thatcher won her last General Election in 1987.

The unprecedented prosperity of the last ten years has also bought with it political costs for an incumbent Labour government that believes in the public realm and that has presided over such prosperity and

increasingly centrist politics. Robert Hughes wrote of the Weimar Republic that 'political stress is always apt to shrink the private arena and attach it onto the public' (Hughes, 1991) and the converse is equally true.

Moreover, familiarity grows over time, all governments get tired and ministers wear themselves out in office as the intellectual and policy capital accumulated in Opposition is spent. There were already signs of this in 2001. But by 2005, the ambition of vision was visibly diminishing. It is not surprising voters thought they had heard much of our campaign before. They had. Key sections of the 2005 Labour Manifesto seemed to have been cut and pasted from that of 2001.

Both promised to build on progress made, with familiar abstract nouns: modernisation, rights and responsibilities, social justice and economic efficiency. And both promised to 'make Britain the best place to do business in Europe'. In 2001 we were 'setting targets for an 85 per cent success rate for 11-year-olds in English and Maths' and in 2005 we promised to 'intensify our literacy and numeracy programme to help an extra 50,000 pupils achieve high standards at age 11, reaching our targets of 85 per cent of pupils succeeding at the basics.' In both 2001 and 2005, we aspired to every school becoming a specialist school and maintained our 'historic commitment to open higher education to half of all young people'. In both we promised 'new powers to tackle unruly behaviour'. In 2001, we said 'prisoners are already subject to compulsory testing ... and we will roll out drug-testing to cover offenders at every stage of the system' and in 2005 'Offenders under probation supervision will be randomly drug tested to mirror what already happens to offenders in custody'. In 2001, we said 'we will build on our youth justice reforms to improve the standard of custodial accommodation' and in 2005 'We will continue to overhaul our youth justice system and improve Young Offender Institutions.' (Labour Party, 2001, 2005)

Novelty for its own sake is deplorable and continuity is commendable if the policy is working and many of these policies were. It could be argued that even those policies that were not working needed more time to bed down. In 2001, the electorate seemed receptive to the idea that Labour needed more time. But by 2005, voters were less receptive. Even if it was right as public policy, the steady-as-she-goes approach, repeating promises to build on past achievements, was clearly palling on voters.

And boredom's twin was complacency. All long-serving governments risk being impaled on a Morton's fork of expectation. For the first term, as long as spectacular disasters are avoided, voters seem to accept that the new government needs time to put right the mistakes of their predecessors. After that, any deficiencies in the delivery of public services are punished but successes are taken as a right. If the economy slumps, it is the fault of government but if it grows steadily, it is soon taken for granted. More of the same encourages voters to assume progress. It is dangerous for any politician ever to rely on voters rewarding them for their achievements – as Winston Churchill discovered in 1945. Yesterday's bread is soon forgotten. Politicians always need to root campaigns in their vision of the future and although we often said we understood this in 2001 and 2005, too often we forgot it in practice.

And when we did remember, it was difficult to excite the electorate. When the economy is so strong, you can only promise more of the same and voters tend to take it for granted. We had important proposals to enhance people's sense of physical security – being tough on crime and its causes and tackling anti-social behaviour. These are issues of deep concern to voters and any government that fails to deliver in these areas will lose elections. But that does not mean they form the basis of a platform from which to move politics forward. Securing a licence to operate is not the same as a political cause that excites voters and renews their faith in a government's forward-looking vision.

Yet as well as the measures to protect society, the Government has also had an energetic programme for social justice. Here too, in tackling deprivation and exclusion, Labour has a strong record of achievement – 700,000 children and a million pensioners lifted out of poverty – and a powerful programme for the future, informed by a moral vision.

But for all its moral urgency, with a fifth of the population still living in poverty, the British Social Attitudes Survey in 2005 found that while three-quarters of those polled felt that the gap between rich and poor was too great, less than a third said that government should redistribute income from the better off to the less well off (Sefton, 2005). And that is not only because of the Government's success in tackling poverty. An inescapable problem in building a political constituency to tackle poverty is that it is not always visible.

A hundred years ago, class was a powerful predictor of deprivation. In any working class district, poverty and deprivation were evident. But while concentrations of poverty, deprivation and exclusion persist and

may well become more intense, disadvantage is now more diffused than ever before. Over 70 per cent of income deprived people live outside the 10 per cent most income deprived areas (ODPM, 2004).

Variations in deprivation within local areas are also often not perceptible to others nearby. According to the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation, Swindon is number 171 out of 354 local authorities, right in the middle. But out of the 119 super output areas into which Swindon is divided by statisticians, 11 are in the least deprived 10 per cent of such areas in England and seven are in the most deprived 10 per cent. And the variations and complexities exist even within those super output areas. One lower layer super output area, which covers part of the Gorse Hill and Pinehurst ward, falls within the 10 per cent most deprived lower layer super output areas on the overall Index of Multiple Deprivation but does better than that on employment deprivation, falling within the 16 per cent most deprived such areas but significantly worse on education deprivation, falling within the two per cent most deprived such areas (ODPM, 2004).

Alongside those still living in poverty and deprivation lives the great majority of the population, increasingly well-off and aspiring to become more so. And many who live close to the poverty line and benefit from egalitarian policies do not see themselves as recipients of progressive policies. The British Social Attitudes survey suggests that three quarters of people identify themselves as in the middle of the income spectrum, whether or not they actually are. Another survey from 2003 suggested that only six per cent felt poor 'all the time' and a further 17 per cent felt poor 'often'.

The process of 'othering' the poor, so powerfully described by Ruth Lister (Lister, 2004) is an argument for tackling poverty as a moral imperative but it is also a political fact that helps explain the difficulties in building a sustainable constituency to tackle poverty.

This government has made more progress in tackling poverty in a short period than any other but deprivation in modern Britain is insufficiently visible and pressing to most voters to build a sufficiently powerful coalition around this cause alone.

Renewal

Since the election, the Labour Party has been agonising over how to create a new sense of purpose and energy and meet the electoral challenge. 'Renewal' is the slogan of 2006 as 'delivery' was in 2001 but, as with the earlier slogan, few agree how to turn it into practice.

The default position is that renewal will follow automatically from Tony Blair's exit from 10 Downing Street, accompanied, ideally, by a withdrawal of troops from Iraq. But if, as I have suggested, the antagonism towards Tony Blair is in part a proxy for disengagement from New Labour, then his departure alone will not be sufficient to transform the party's fortunes.

Arguments about whether Labour renews by appealing primarily to potentially Tory votes or potential Lib Dem voters are tactical. Strategically, a renewed Labour needs both. That is the abiding lesson of New Labour since the 1990s.

And then some believe that the challenge is essentially one of presentation, continuing to colonise the centre ground in the way we have done successfully for the last ten years, with new New Labour slogans, re-badging existing policies and approaches with fresh faces to present them. In this view, the Tory move into New Labour territory is not a threat but a sign we are winning. It is an analysis that is symptomatic of governments that have been in power a long time. It is difficult for incumbents to break out from familiar mental frameworks which have brought such electoral success.

Of course, the psephological evidence supports those who argue that Labour must continue to occupy the centre ground. That is necessary for renewal – but not sufficient. Occupying the centre ground does not have to mean continuing to occupy it in exactly the same way. Nor should it, particularly as the world is changing so rapidly around us. The main lesson from May 2005, confirmed by all recent polls and the local election results, is that more of the same will not work. Mining the same seams and repackaging the results is what Labour has been doing for eight years and it clearly is not working any longer.

Those who believe this will adequately differentiate Labour from the Tories overlook the fact that this was precisely the approach that drove the 2005 campaign. The words 'equality' and social justice' were mentioned fifteen times in the Labour manifesto whereas the Tories did not mention them at all. 'Poverty' was mentioned thirty-two times in the Labour manifesto while the Tories mentioned it four times. 'Africa'

was mentioned eight times in the Labour Manifesto and not once in the Tory manifesto. And the Labour campaign regularly mentioned the historic and radical pledge to abolish child poverty, not matched by the Tories. There is no reason to think repackaging this strategy for 2009 will create the conditions for a fourth term victory. It is not necessary for a sea-change in politics to effect a change of government. Seepage can have the same result.

David Cameron's leadership is credited with giving the Conservatives their current lead in the polls. But this is too generous. He himself is less of a problem for the Left than what his honeymoon revealed about the state of politics. So far, it is impossible to know what sort of government he would run and what it would mean for Britain. His strategy is based on revealing as little detail as possible. In Rory Bremner's phrase, he is the Tory iPod onto which anyone can download anything they want.

His ascent, based on no more than an affable manner and bland phrases about contemporary Britain from the perspective of Notting Hill, reveals not so much an appetite for him and 'modern' Conservatism but for alternatives to New Labour. A successful onslaught on David Cameron would not, on its own, blunt that appetite nor staunch the haemorrhaging of key voters in marginal seats who feel it is time for a change. The question for Labour is why those voters responsible for the Cameron bounce are willing to give a blank cheque to the Tories.

The powerful usually tend to underestimate threats to their power. Louis XVI is supposed to have written 'Rein' in his diary after a day's hunting on the day the Bastille fell. Pope Leo X described the Reformation as 'a mere squabble of envious monks'. And it would be an historic mistake for Labour to believe the Government can be adequately renewed by sidling back to the 1980s, or refreshing presentation, attacking David Cameron and simply waiting for Tony Blair to go, or any combination of them. At best, a strategy focused on successfully attacking David Cameron might help Labour to cling onto power, persuading voters we are the best of a bad lot. But negativity does not encourage creativity and it will not renew the Labour Party. A victory won on such a basis would consign Labour, like the Conservatives between 1992 and 1997, to a lingering death and a long time in Opposition. The other approaches may not even see off the Tories again.

Every part of Labour's approach must be renewed. It is good but not enough to talk of social justice and how many people we have lifted out of poverty. It is good but not enough to talk about how we have secured the NHS as a public service and the values it embodies. It is good but not enough to talk about how we labour for the world's poor. It is good but not enough to talk of economic success. Labour did all that at the last two elections and if it had been sufficient, Labour would have scraped more than such a fragile majority in 2005. Detroit car manufacturers learned the hard way that re-badging is not the same as renewal. If Labour does not learn the same lesson before the next election, Labour will pay the same price Detroit did.

The Left must make its vision inspire once again the coalitions of voters who delivered three General Election victories. And to start this process, the focus needs to shift from the economic remedies of the twentieth century to a political reinvigoration of democracy. Otherwise, the sour relationship between voters and their democracy will thwart the Left's vision of a better, fairer society.

Disengagement

Underpinning the challenges to a fourth term for Labour is a secular disengagement from politics and disillusion with politicians, rooted in complex but apparently irresistible long-term trends: more autonomous and less deferential voters; the trivialisation of the mass media and all the phenomena of globalisation which restrict the ability of politicians to improve the lives of voters; and the rise of the career professional politician, too constrained by personal ambition to be able to respond boldly and effectively to these challenges.

Poll after poll reports cynicism about politicians and politics and the disengagement of voters from the political process. The British Social Attitudes survey 2003 reported that 76 per cent of people believed parties were only interested in people's votes and not in their opinions (National Centre for Social Research, 2003). Labour won the 2005 General Election with the support of just over one in five of voters and the three main parties between them managed to persuade only half the electorate to turn out to vote for them.

At a time when ideological faultlines are blurred and the political classes are crowding into the centre

ground, voters have become disengaged and disillusioned. They either do not vote at all or vote for the least bad option. And this tends to punish whatever party happens to be in government, as the longer a party is in power, the more incumbency is punished. Voters restlessly seek freshness and change, in constant (but constantly unfulfilled) hope that the new boss will not be the same as the old boss.

This does not justify quietist pessimism. A precipitous fall in turnout in 2001 seems to have stabilised in 2005. This is no cause for complacency but it does suggest that the process of disengagement is not irreversible.

There is certainly nothing new about voters realising the limits of what politicians can do for them. Men and women fall in love, babies get born and every day human beings experience moments of transcendent happiness despite politicians' speeches and appearances on television. Exhilarating music has always been composed, great books written and films created and inspiring paintings painted whatever politicians have done. The current fashionable preoccupation of the political class with policies for happiness misunderstands the human condition and the capacities of politicians.

And the upsurge of optimism about politics and the promise of renewal that accompanied new Labour into government in 1997 might suggest that the system is capable of recovery and that the swing of the democratic pendulum can work to sustain faith in the political system without radical constitutional change.

And it is always important to be sure radical remedies are needed before rushing into action. Politicians should approach reform as constitutional physicians not engineers. Constitutional engineers build constitutions from new, while physicians heal what needs healing, balancing the case that constitutional change should flow from principle against the risks and unforeseen consequences of radical change in such a fundamental part of public life. Evolution, not revolution, has characterised the British response to the transformations of history. Historically, constitutional change has been reactive and politicians have acted as physicians.

However, there are four reasons to argue that they now need so to act and effect change. First, the optimism and trust of 1997 has now leached away and there is no evidence that it will reappear any time soon. A change of government would seem to offer no solution to pervasive public cynicism about politicians. A recent poll showed two-thirds of voters believed David Cameron's espousal of green policies was not genuine but simply designed to win votes. Whatever advances the Tories may make in opinion polls, there is no evidence to suggest that voters believe they or any other party will restore trust or overcome cynicism about politics and politicians.

Second, the long continuing and well-documented accretion of power to the executive is destructive of public trust in politics. The longer it continues, the more trust is eroded. A functioning balance of power and effective scrutiny of government fosters a healthy democracy. Opacity of power and the evasion of responsibility does not.

Third, the continuing decline of deference and hierarchy and the growth of individual empowerment and autonomy suggest that politicians are going to have to work harder and harder to earn permission to be allowed to serve in government. What the Power Report calls 'the rise of new citizens' (The POWER Inquiry, 2006), increasingly empowered and self-confident as individuals, has collided with the rise of the career politician who can rely on little authority other than a political career to validate his or her decisions. Nearly a decade on from 1997 this process is accelerating.

Finally, and most profoundly, it now appears that the politically excluded no longer have the political machinery to gain a purchase on power. As the Power Report pointed out 'the social cultural and political organisations which gave the industrial working class major political power and shaped their political aspirations have little or no purchase among [these] newly marginalised groups and as yet no new political organisations have filled the political vacuum' (The POWER Inquiry, 2006: 31-32).

Survey evidence supports the proposition that a significant shift is taking place. In 1973, 15 per cent strongly believed 'people have no say in what the government does'. By 1994 that had risen to 30 per cent. In 2003, 56 per cent agreed that they have 'no say in what the government does' (The POWER Inquiry, 2006, 76).

This is a problem for all political parties. But it is particularly acute for the Left which needs a healthy democracy to deliver the values which are its purpose.

Equality and equity

At the heart of renewal must lie the Left's complex relationship with its values. Equality is the defining instinct of the Left. It is a recognition of the mutual and reciprocal dependency and obligation that are essentially human. For the Left, equality must always live at the heart of belief.

But the quest for equality has always been shaped politically by the historical circumstances of the time. It was in the nineteenth century. And so it was, differently, in the twentieth. So too must it adapt again now. Talking in timeless absolutes is an indulgence of intellectuals. The political challenge today, and always, is how best to reconcile egalitarianism with democratic politics.

For generations the Left has wrestled with definitions of equality. For the democratic left, equality cannot mean a comprehensive equality of outcome. That is either impossible (no-one can prescribe that everyone should be as healthy or live as long or be as capable as everyone else, even if it were desirable to do so) or unfair (how can it be justifiable that the lazy should be rewarded in exactly the same way as the industrious?) or inefficient (as Rawls (1971) has argued, inequalities can be justified when they benefit the worst off more than the pursuit of equality would).

Nor can any approach based on uniformity be acceptable. In the last fifty years, social and economic change have fragmented identities and broken down rigidities of class. Individuals define themselves politically as much in terms of their gender, family status, sexuality, ethnicity, age or disability as their class. As a result, the approach to equality has necessarily also become more complex and plural. There are aspects of it that remain uncontroversially unconditional: equality of worth which underpins the political equalities associated with citizenship, equality of suffrage and equality before the law. Similarly, the principle of equality of access to the core social goods of health and education and minimum standards of living is enshrined.

But equality of opportunity, the motor of democratic socialism in the twentieth century has seemed increasingly problematic. After generations of social democratic reforms, too many chances in life remain denied to too many. If equality of outcome was unjustifiable, equality of opportunity proved unable to accommodate the impact of brute luck. Those born well-off and clever and to families that nurtured innate talent always benefited most from equality of opportunity. But to intervene decisively to neutralise the accidents of birth and genetic endowment has always been rejected as unacceptable state action, which would thwart the natural aspiration of parents for their children and create new forms of injustice.

Even if acceptable ways could be found of neutralising the incidence of brute luck, equality of opportunity sits uncomfortably with a new politics of identity and personal fulfilment. For in the end that old vision merely promised that elites would become more open-ended and that the most able would not be held back by accidents of birth. Even if it had worked, it promised little to most people, all those who would never become an Einstein or a millionaire or Prime Minister or the editor of a newspaper, no matter how much opportunity they were given. The historic view of equality of opportunity ignored the needs and aspirations of most of the population.

And there has also been anguish over how redistribution, the key to equality, should be carried out. Should equalisation be according to need or desert and how should we define those concepts? What are the components of 'sufficiency' or in David Miller's phrase the 'social minimum' (Miller, 2005) or the 'equality of capability' favoured by the Equalities Review (Equalities Review, 2006), which more sophisticated thinkers have used as the basis for their theories of redistribution in modern democratic societies? How should the social minimum include income, education and health, and the built and natural environments, and according to whom?

To deal with the ideological, political and practical challenges of pursuing equality, Labour has recently tended to follow Tawney in defining equality as equality of opportunity for the individual to fulfil his or her potential. As Tawney wrote in *Equality*, in a delicate reconciliation of liberty and equality:

> *'A society is free in so far as, and only in so far as, within the limits set by nature, knowledge and resources, its institutions and policies are such as to enable all its members to grow to their full stature, to do their duty as they see it and – since liberty should not be too austere – to have their fling when they feel like it.'*(Tawney, 1931: 268).

This ability to fulfil realistic individual aspirations without doing so axiomatically one at the expense of others contrasts Tawney's view with that of a meritocratic vision of equality of opportunity. It is a formulation that addresses many concerns about egalitarian politics – for example, charges about the politics of envy.

But it also leaves key questions unanswered. It is often conveniently but wrongly held to be synonymous with other definitions of equality. It does not produce equal material outcomes and it is more generous and pervasive than a meritocratic equality of opportunity. And it does not, on its own resolve questions about distribution. Indeed, in contemporary formulations about the equality of opportunity for the individual to fulfil his or her potential, it makes such questions more difficult and complex. In traditional class-based politics, redistribution was often conceived simply as taking place between classes and its subject was defined as power and wealth. The new formulation introduces more subjective criteria of fulfilment alongside externally measurable material ones.

And above all it creates fluid policy objectives as definitions shift over time in response to changing circumstances. Although politics on the Left remains fundamentally about just distributions and class remains important in Britain, social and economic change raises new barriers to opportunity for fulfilment in different groups and from generation to generation.

The rise in the number of lone parents and of households where both parents work, for example, generates pressing issues of childcare which did not exist a generation ago. Two-way carers caring simultaneously for an elderly parent and a child, those genetically identified as susceptible to dread disease, economically inactive men in their 50s, white working class young men without qualifications, today all raise different issues for public policy. In each generation, some groups will need greater resources than others to enable them to fulfil their potential and those groups will not necessarily be the same from generation to generation.

Nor does it resolve a continuing debate about the limits of the state and its obligations. Removing the barriers to educational opportunity is essential but that is usually unlikely to extend to an obligation on the state to finance an individual in the acquisition of successive doctorates in all the Indo-European languages. There are no obvious answers of principle as to where these boundaries should be drawn. This will depend, among other things on the nature and extent of the barriers at any given time and the competing claims for scarce resources.

Most recently, the Equalities Review has adopted a sophisticated approach to tackling inequality through a complex methodology which identifies its causes in a combination of socio-economic and non-socio-economic factors which create vulnerability – out of which, in turn, long-term and persistent inequality can be triggered by particular life events (Equalities Review, 2006). Its description of modern inequality will be invaluable to policy-makers but its very complexity makes it less useful for politicians who are trying to build a constituency to tackle poverty. Crusades tend to be roused by a war-cry and not multi-causal analyses. And the difficulty of reducing the complex phenomenon of modern inequality to such a simple formulation forces politicians to retain a flexible and pragmatic approach to tackling it.

Tony Blair was much mocked for his refusal to condemn to Jeremy Paxman in 2001 the inequality between David Beckham and the rest of the population. But if he had condemned such inequality, he would naturally have been asked what he was going to do about it and to answer that he would have needed to have a clear idea of an acceptable level of inequality. And here he would have been in a long tradition of democratic socialists who have been unable to provide such an answer.

Even Tony Crosland, the godfather of post war democratic socialism, contemptuous as he was of the intellectually sloppy, could not find a way to pin down what he wanted. He saw problems in trying to square the circle. 'Equality of opportunity and social mobility' he wrote in *The Future of Socialism* 'are not enough'. But he brushed aside any thought that he should try to be more precise about what was enough: 'We need ... more equality than we now have' and 'we can describe the direction of advance and even discern the immediate landscape ahead but the ultimate objective lies wrapped in complete uncertainty ... where en route before we reach some drab extreme we shall wish to stop I have no idea.' (Crosland, 1956: 216).

Crosland's egalitarianism was driven by hatred of the inequalities he witnessed but also by an antagonism towards the consequences of policies to remove them, if taken to logical extremes. It is a pragmatic approach which is still deployed by politicians as if it was something more certain but what underlies this approach is a realistic acceptance of the need for politicians to strike a balance – in other words, to proceed in a way that is politically acceptable at any given time.

What underpins that acceptability is the concept of equity: fairness. The philosophical fluidity of egalitarianism make a shared sense of fairness crucial for identifying the political priorities for egalitarian

measures at any one time. Without a shared sense of fairness, egalitarianism can be perceived as the enemy of individual aspiration, subverting its political viability. Political arguments about merit and desert can overwhelm those of social justice. Why, say those who see themselves as hard-working and moral, should their taxes subsidise the lazy and feckless?

This is why the Labour Government's focus on child poverty is so significant politically. It moves the argument about social justice out of the sphere of arguments about merit as few deny that children, who are unable to make moral and practical judgements, should have the right to live free of all the burdens of poverty. It positions egalitarian policy in the framework of equity.

The establishment of a collective perception of fairness is a fundamental task for politics on the Left. Equity has always been the profound ineradicable human instinct that underpins the quest for equality. Work by evolutionary biologists is converging with experimental economics to demonstrate how equity lies at the heart of human society. As Joseph Henrich and his collaborators wrote in *Foundations of Human Sociality* 'people have social preferences. They seem to care about the nature of the transaction as well as the outcome.' (Henrich *et al*, 2004).

Experiment and observation suggest that people can be prepared to sacrifice individual gain for a process they believe to be fair. Without fairness there can be no social or political stability and without such stability there can be no economic stability. This approach also helps to place the constitutional arrangements that express a shared sense of equity at the centre of the political agenda for the Left.

But difficult practical questions are raised in translating fairness into practice. As Henrich and his collaborators asked 'are the violations of the selfishness axiom seen in experiments evidence of universal social preferences? Or, are social preferences modulated by economic, cultural and social environments? If the latter, which economic and social conditions are involved? Is reciprocal behaviour better explained statistically by individuals' attributes such as their sex, age and relative wealth or by the attributes of the group to which the individuals belong?' (Henrich *et al*, 2004).

There are no final answers to these questions. People decide, through democratic processes, what they believe to be fair, at any given moment and this is likely to shift more frequently and radically as social and economic change escalates.

The rebirth of anxiety

For fifty years, the electorate has moved in long swings between the politics of anxiety and contentment. Emancipation in the 1950s and 1960s was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by disquiet as the post-war settlement fractured. Now the last decade has delivered prosperity and stability for most. Dislocation created division but, in the affluent aftermath, politicians have followed voters, herding into a big tent pitched on centre ground.

But contentment is not a permanent feature of the human condition. And neither is stability. Walking upright, fire, the wheel, printing, steampower, electricity, quantum mechanics – history is all about change. But never before have so many changes taken place simultaneously in so many different spheres, demographically, economically, socially and culturally. Nor has change been so rapid and profound, with such potentially radical and destabilising consequences for so many people.

Populations are being transformed with booming numbers of young people in developing countries – one in five of the world's population is aged between 10 and 19 (UNFPA, 2003). 87 per cent of young people live in the developing world (UNFPA, 2004). In the developed world, people are living longer, but not necessarily more actively. In this country, by 2014, for the first time, there will be more people over 65 than there are under 16 (SEU, 2004: 117).

And there will be political consequences. Worry felt by many old people living longer on fixed incomes will grow as a political force while, at the same time, younger people, sustaining a dependency ratio projected to increase by 10 per cent over the next 30 years, will exert countervailing pressures on resources. It has been predicted that nearly half of all adults will be carers at some point (Hutton and Hirst, 2002) and increasing longevity will place increasing burdens on them. Numbers suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, for example, are predicted to double in the next twenty years (International Longevity Centre, 2002). Around 10 per cent of women in their 40s and early 50s are estimated to be two-way carers, caring for both a parent and a child under 18. And such intense pressures placed on so many will confront politicians with hard choices about how to allocate resources.

Globalisation is transforming employment, shifting manufacturing and services round the world, not in decades but in years. In 1996, China exported $19 billion of ICT goods, 15 per cent of what the USA exported. By 2004, China was the biggest exporter of ICT goods in the world, selling $180 billion compared to $149 billion exported by the USA (OECD, 2005). Twenty years ago, 15 out of the top 20 companies in the Fortune 500 list of US companies were in the oil or automative industries. In 2004, that number was down to five. Jobs for life have been going for some time but now they are being followed by professions for life. And it will not just be those working today who feel the consequences. Already, some pensioners dependent on occupational pensions are suddenly finding themselves second class citizens even though they dutifully fulfilled their responsibilities to provide for themselves, simply because their companies failed in this new brutally competitive global market-place and defaulted on their obligations.

Traditional family structures are breaking down. Thirty years ago, less than one in five households was headed by a single person. Today that figure is nearly one in three, up 50 per cent in a generation (SEU, 2004: 120). The percentage of marriages ending in divorce has risen from 43 per cent in 1981 to 58 per cent in 2003 (ONS, 2005). And front-line public services often find themselves picking up the pieces of this restless quest for self-fulfilment as politicians wrestle with how far these issues are properly a concern for them and how far they should be left to individuals and their priests, religious and secular.

Culture wars are opening up new fissures in society. Never before have human beings been so free to pursue their own interests and desires but at this time of unprecedented individual liberty, a new yearning for discipline and self abnegation has grown. It is noticeable how the most vibrant communities in the great monotheistic religions – in Christianity, Islam and Judaism – are often the most orthodox. Animal welfare and animal rights pit a new ethical system against historic anthropocentric systems.

Revolutions in biology and medicine are changing conceptions of the nature of life itself. As it becomes increasingly possible to identify in advance susceptibility to dread diseases, who is going to bear the cost of new treatments and for whom should they be made available?

Climate change is threatening the future of the planet itself. But there is no consensus on how it should be tackled and who should pay for it.

In all these changes, vulnerability will assume new forms and people who never dreamt that they could become vulnerable will suddenly experience the shock of exposure to risk. The healthy twenty-five-year-old professional, in a good job, who suddenly discovers a high degree of genetic susceptibility to a dread disease. The pensioner who has saved throughout her working life and accumulated a good occupational pension who suddenly sees it removed because her blue-chip employer cannot compete in the increasingly open and competitive global market place and so cannot meet its pension responsibilities. The house-owner who cannot sell her home because climate change has rendered it more vulnerable to risk of flooding. A parent, suddenly becoming sick or a child suddenly becoming so ill that they need a parent carer, halving the income of a two-income family who then find themselves depending on the resources of the state in ways they would never have anticipated.

And for the excluded 20 per cent, life remains difficult and full of anxiety, as they suffer not just material deprivation but also, as Ruth Lister has described 'non-material aspects of poverty such as lack of voice, disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem; shame and stigma, powerlessness, denial of rights and diminished citizenship'(Lister, 2004).

No-one can predict precisely the consequences of such complex transformations but change always offers new opportunities and trails damage in its wake – and none of it is ever distributed evenly. Power usually accrues to the powerful and the powerless usually lose out. Power and resources will be redistributed whatever happens. For the Left, this process must reflect its basic values of equity and fairness and not end up reinforcing injustice.

Realising a visionary, generous egalitarianism now demands constant dismantling of barriers constantly being reinforced by the speed and extent of change. The task is no longer to provide equal starting points through equal inputs or a final equalising of outcomes. Instead it is a continual task of removing the barriers that prevent individuals realising their potential.

It is not surprising that grand abstract nouns refuse to be biddable by politicians. 'Liberty' poses similar problems, and so does 'community'. As a result of all these changes, the Left's historic commitment to equality, however defined, should be recognised not as a destination but a process, despite the millenarianism that has always flowed through the veins of the Left. If we succeed, we move ever closer to

the New Jerusalem but never actually get there because the challenges of change will continue to produce new inequalities to tackle. And effective action depends on an effective democracy.

Equity and democracy

The setting of egalitarian priorities in a democracy can only be secured in a dialogue between politicians and voters. And this can only take place if voters have faith in the system within which that dialogue takes place. Politicians on the Left can only command support for egalitarian policies if they are felt by voters to have permission to speak about such things. This is not a judgement on the trustworthiness of individual politicians but about the credibility of the political system and the trust it generates in the political process.

In 2001, the Wanless Report provided the basis for the Government to build a consensus for an increase in taxation to deliver a massive increase in resources for the National Health Service. There is a deep rooted belief across the country in the NHS as the most equitable way of providing healthcare. The work that went into the Wanless Report generated trust that more funding was necessary, creating the support for the increase in taxation.

This was a seminal event in the history of this Labour Government. Before it, there was significant doubt, even among some members of the Cabinet, about whether the NHS was sustainable as a national system of healthcare funded by the taxpayer. After it, a consensus became established among all political parties that it should remain so. One of the great egalitarian institutions was secured for the foreseeable future.

But this took place when most voters were still prepared to give the Government the benefit of the doubt and showed in the 2001 General Election that they believed the Government had earned the right to build on what it had begun. The erosion of trust since then raises doubt about whether such an exercise would be as successful if it were carried out today.

Restoring trust and credibility to the political process is a task for all politicians. But for the Left, political reform is essential as part of a broader egalitarian politics to which the Right is congenitally opposed. Since 1997 Labour has embarked on a radical, and still unfinished, programme of constitutional reform, involving devolution of power and legislation to secure freedom of information and the protection of human rights. All of these policies constrict the power of a centralised executive and are designed to restore trust in our democratic system. The Conservatives have opposed each of them.

For the Left, political reform and renewal must always be central to its egalitarian mission. For the Right, it will only ever be peripheral to its central objective of regaining power, useful if it helps them do so, discardable if it does not. And so it has always been. The 1867 Reform Act was driven not by any ideological vision of extending the suffrage but by pragmatic political calculations. In 1997, Labour had a clear analysis of the problems facing Britain to which it was offering answers. For David Cameron's Conservatives today, the main problem seems to be that Labour is in power, not them. Their discourse is tactical, about how to regain power and not how they address the strategic challenges confronting the country. For the Right the central ideological mission is to reduce the role of the public in the polity. Its interest in reforming the mechanisms that translate that role into practice will always be less than that of the Left for whom it is a fundamental purpose.

The articulation of a credible vision of a fair society requires constitutional arrangements which engender trust in those articulating such a vision. But it is not just the vision that needs underpinning in this way. It is also the mechanism for delivering it.

Reforming Leviathan

Most now agree that the historic mechanism for delivering egalitarian values – the centralised state – has proved itself to be all too often sclerotic and inefficient and insensitive, even in democratic societies where it has avoided the perils of tyranny. Yet no-one has found a practical way to replace it. Even those parties passionately committed to shrinking the state, in Britain and the United States, have failed to do so. And, among other things, ageing populations and declining dependency ratios mean it is going to be difficult for any party to shrink the size of the state significantly in the foreseeable future.

For the Right this may be a disagreeable inevitability, but for the Left, egalitarianism can only be delivered through public action. Only public action can deliver fairness in the face of change because this is the only way to pool risk. And only public action can ensure the opportunities of change are not arrogated unfairly to an elite few.

Only effective and efficient public services, funded fairly, can deliver a fairer society. The problem is not that there is no world-class healthcare and education in the United Kingdom, nor that there is not unprecedented prosperity. It is just that too often it is confined to a minority. Public services strive to make these things available to everyone on the basis of equity. They are key to the good life, which cannot be truly good if it is confined to a few.

Reconciling the need for public action with a state that too often is inefficient and uncaring is an intractable challenge. Different approaches to shackling leviathan have surfaced in the last 50 years – market mechanisms, deploying the discipline of market forces in the public sector, localism, transferring power from national politicians to local ones, and Burke's little platoons of civic society – and all have their merits but they have also all revealed limitations.

The full efficiencies of the market can only be delivered when there is competition. As Schumpeter pointed out, competition produces optimum outcomes through a 'process of Creative Destruction' which he called 'the essential fact about capitalism' (Schumpeter, 1975). Creative destruction is not a politically sustainable option for public services. When politicians are in danger of forgetting this, they can recall the result of the General Election in 2001 in Wyre Forest to remind themselves of the consequences.

Choice is axiomatically a desirable goal for public services because it empowers the user and helps communicate a sense of control over life which is a key criterion against which improvements in public services should be measured. But because individual choices cannot be predicted precisely, supply cannot be planned in advance and therefore it requires surplus capacity and this is costly. In the absence of creative destruction, this remains a continuing burden on the public purse. Moreover, if taxpayers pay to ensure delivery of essential services to everyone, it is difficult to justify individual users choosing to consume those services in ways which manifestly do not deliver benefits. It is hard to justify, for example, taxpayers' money being wasted on quack healthcare remedies. Clearly there are limits to how far the choice agenda can be extended.

Even if those limits are accepted and, instead of operating as a full-fledged market, choice is used to send signals to government about desired improvements, there are still significant practical problems that arise from the potential disjunction between individual choices and the public good, a conflict which does not arise in the same way in relation to private goods. Politically unsustainable signals can be sent. For example, taxpayers consent to investment in education for several reasons but most do not do so to promote social segregation. Yet there are parents who will choose a school for their children on the basis of whether they are more or less likely to mix with children from similar social and ethnic backgrounds. In a responsive democracy, such choices should not send any signal to government about the allocation of resources. And again, schools and hospitals cease to be viable long before all their users have deserted them. Then the choice of a minority can over-ride the choices of a majority, again democratically unsustainable.

The more politicians talk of choice while they are forced to place constraints on it, the worse the disjunction between rhetoric and reality and the impact on popular expectations and perceptions of politicians.

These are not arguments against extending choice in public services. It should be, but in ways that focus more on empowering users. That requires reconceptualising choice and how it should operate. Giving more choice between schools has problems not shared by greater choice within schools. And it is there that the greatest educational benefits wait to be reaped.

Outside London, choice of hospital is unlikely to be a high priority for acute patients but choice and control over their care is demonstrably important to those suffering from chronic complaints. The introduction of direct payments has been a welcome innovation in empowering such patients and their carers but it is based on the market supplying sufficient choices. Sometimes it does not do so. Demand does not always generate supply and in those circumstances direct payments provide no empowerment.

To tackle this problem, frontline professionals in Swindon devised a more sophisticated model which makes choice a reality for patients and their carers and gives them control over their healthcare. Local statutory agencies and representatives of local carers proposed a new system for dementia care which would offer, from available resources, carers and users of dementia services a menu of choices for care from which they would be entitled to select, up to a predetermined limit, set by the availability of resources. The choices would be offered by current statutory providers and any voluntary or private sector providers who might be interested in participating in the scheme. The menu would be agreed by a standing committee

chaired by a local carer and consisting of representatives of statutory providers, users and carers, and the voluntary and private sectors. To enable users and carers to make effective and informed choices, a new information and guidance service would be set up to empower users and carers and advise them.

The proposal would deliver diversity of provision and choice. It puts users and carers in the driving seat, by involving them in the responsibility for service provision. And it tackles the different challenges of doing so, not least by finding a new way to encourage collaboration between the various agencies, and doing so equitably for users. Roger Bullock, the consultant in old age psychiatry in Swindon, describes it as ' a major step forward – nothing else like it is happening as far as I know. It is also based on true socialist values.'

Although devised by frontline professionals and enthusiastically welcomed by local carers, sadly this innovative proposal stalled in the Department of Health which is still working out how to put into practice the Prime Minister's expressed belief in empowering frontline professionals.

The limits of localism

The sclerotic insensitivity of the Department of Health's response to the Swindon model for dementia care exemplifies why faith has been lost in central government as an engine for change and seems to support the arguments for localism, the devolution of power and accountability away from Westminster and Whitehall as close as possible to the neighbourhood. It seems uncontroversial, as who could argue against taking power away from remote bureaucrats and giving it back to the people? Except that on closer inspection that is not exactly what localism means.

Localism is a slippery concept which swims between local management and local accountability and there is no axiomatic reason why the two need coincide nor why it need change anything other than swapping one set of national politicians for another set of local politicians.

In theory there is no reason why accountability which remains primarily at national level should be incompatible with a high degree of managerial autonomy at the frontline of public services. However, in practice, managerial autonomy tends to operate at the level of accountability. If national politicians remain responsible for the education system, it is hardly surprising that they should wish to drive through initiatives, such as the literacy and numeracy strategies, to deliver the results for which they will be held accountable.

Accountability is key. If it is removed from the centre, then local managerial autonomy should follow. There is substance to fashionable talk about the benefits of devolving power to smaller political units. But local can also be limited and restricted. It can work against the equitable distribution of resources throughout the country and against a cohesive sense of national identity. And faddish deference to localism rarely contemplates the consequences when local authorities fail – precisely the point at least advantaged and most vulnerable who get hurt first and worst.

Swindon's experience over the last ten years is instructive. Since it became a unitary authority in 1997 Swindon Borough Council has struggled to deliver services efficiently and effectively. Between 1997 and 2001 the Labour Group ran the Council. But as they themselves acknowledge, they failed to deliver the necessary reforms to improve services. In 2001, the Conservative Group took over as a minority administration and then took full control in 2003. They too failed to make necessary improvements. Between 2001 and 2004 the overall performance of the council varied between poor and weak. Social Services received a zero stars rating in 2002, and did so again in 2003 and 2004. The Local Education Authority remained in special measures.

Now Swindon Borough Council is finally being turned around. New management systems are in place, there are capable new Directors and a new, experienced and effective Chief Executive. The most recent assessment by the National Audit Office gave the Council a two star rating, up from zero just a year before.

But the turning point was not local initiative but intervention by national government. The Department for Education and Skills drove through a new structure for education in which a private sector firm provided strategic management. In 2003, Ofsted found that 85 per cent of the functions performed by the Education Service were satisfactory or better compared with 30 per cent two years earlier.

Ministers and officials from the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister provided the Council with resources to transform service delivery. They lent the Council one of their most capable officials, with years

of experience in helping failing local authorities turn themselves around. She introduced rigorous accounting systems and ensured that, at last, the Council began to focus on the users of services. Swindon was also given significant extra money from the centre. Since 2001 funding from national government has increased by 40 per cent (Parliamentary Question, 2005a), supplemented by one-off additional funding, such as £1m for building capacity (Parliamentary Question, 2005b) .

Despite all this, Direct Democracy – a collaborative effort from many of the new intake of Conservative MPs, promoted and 'warmly applauded' by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'the most interesting thing to have come out of the British centre-Right in a long time' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2005) – asserted that 'almost all of the functions currently exercised by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister could and should be devolved' (Direct-Democracy.co.uk, 2005). Perhaps these 'interesting' Conservatives believe that eventually the people of Swindon would have elected councillors who could have turned around the council without help from the centre? But real life worked differently from fashionable theory. The people of Swindon did elect new councillors who had the power and money to make significant improvements. And their new representatives failed them. Over and over again the people of Swindon tried out new representatives. None of them proved any more able that their predecessors to make the improvements that were needed.

'Central government is bad government' says the Tory tract. But Swindon's experience shows this is not axiomatic. It was the fashionably derided system of inspections that quantified the local authority's failures and provided an objective basis for the intervention that turned round the performance of Swindon Borough Council. National government has the capacity for strategic oversight and can rapidly deploy large sums of money to make improvements, as it showed in Swindon. It can provide a breadth and depth of expertise that is not always be found in one local authority. Swindon's experience demonstrates the benefits.

In the real world, such as Swindon, what matters for the individuals who depend on public services is not an ideological fixation with localism, however defined but the construction of appropriate partnerships between local authorities and national government, and the people they serve.

Careless or haphazard decentralisation carries with it the risk of injustice and fragmentation. The centre must retain the responsibility for ensuring that no-one gets left behind anywhere in the United Kingdom. Only central government can do this. Decentralisation, without a balancing role for the centre, means accepting inequality between different parts of the UK. Power, wealth and opportunity always tend to accumulate to those who already possess them. Without central intervention the disadvantaged will tend to stay disadvantaged. This is an essential choice for the Left: the priority can be equality and equity or it can be decentralisation. Both cannot take priority.

Rhetoric about localism and decentralisation often ignores this hard choice. Deprived inner city constituencies, struggling with generations of disadvantage, and remote rural areas, in desperate need of support for their infrastructure, housing and transport and other services, could equally end up abandoned if such rhetoric was put into practice.

The philosophers of localism argue for the merits of diversity but it is remarkable how often Conservative MPs, who pontificate passionately about the general virtues of localism, suddenly and perversely discover the specific iniquities of a postcode lottery, the evil twin of diversity, when they feel their own constituency is getting left behind.

If the British people do not believe it right that parts of Britain should be deprived of access to all the benefits of citizenship, then that demands measures to equalise the distribution of resources. In a democracy the allocation of resources requires accountability for that process. If resources are allocated by government across the nation, then government must be held to account nationally. The localism which demands a transfer of accountability to the local prevents that.

The new localist is like a motorist driving from London to Glasgow whose car develops a problem with the gearbox such that he decides to abandon the car and bicycle to Scotland instead. Even if he gets there eventually, he'll be exhausted and a more sensible option might have been to get the gearbox fixed. There's nothing wrong with a bicycle ride but not for this journey.

The answer is not to throw out the national for the local but find a better relationship between them and for the centre to address its problems by improving its performance, accountability and transparency. Reforming the way central government operates in relation to local services, transforming the number and extent of performance targets, for example, can empower local professionals to become more responsive to

local needs without prejudicing the fairness which most people believe should define our public services. It is the relationship between local and national that matters and not replacing one with the other.

The boundaries of community

Faced with the persistent problems of representative democracy at both local and national level, there has been growing interest in finding ways of weaving new forms of participation into decision-taking and policy implementation by elected representatives, engaging Burke's little platoons of civic society through public consultations and citizens juries, drawing on experiments such as that of Porto Alegre in Brazil, and in a more limited way the Power Commission's experiment with the Harrow Open Budget (The POWER Inquiry, 2006).

Experience suggests that such measures can invigorate democratic politics. The Power Report, for example, claims that such methods can 'deliver citizens the focussed decision-making they demand and which elections and parties cannot offer' and that in its Open Budget process in Harrow '90 per cent of those who attended rated the event either 'very good' or 'good', 80 per cent said they would take more interest in the Council's decisions, and 43 per cent said it had affected their view of the work the Council does for the better (56 per cent said it had not)' (The POWER Inquiry, 2006).

But further claims the Report makes for this process also reveal its limitations. It goes on to say that such participatory measures:

'…appeal directly to citizens' own sense that given the right information, time and structure, they can make decisions that are just as robust and valid as anything chosen by their elected representatives. This is the experience described powerfully by most people who sit on juries in criminal trials, a process which lends legitimacy to our justice system so why not draw upon that inclusive experience elsewhere in our institutions of governance.'(The POWER Inquiry, 2006).

The process of government with its complex trade-offs and need to secure continuing consent for decisions is not the same as the limited remit of juries in a courtroom. Few have the time and energy to commit to a process in which they are 'given the right information, time and structure' to make decisions. Those that do will tend to be the loudest and most articulate and those that have the time and resources to devote themselves, unpaid, to the process. Inevitably this will narrow the pool for selection to a small and unrepresentative minority.

And even if safeguards are put in place to mitigate against this, such as random selection of members as with a trial jury, these will still not deal with the fundamental issue of consent. Whether those participating are simply the loudest and most articulate and motivated members of the community or selected randomly, their decisions will not carry the credibility of those made by the democratically elected.

The potential benefit identified by proponents of participatory democracy – that the process of participating can restore the faith of communities in the political process – depends on two assumptions, neither of which is necessarily true: first, that communities exist which can participate; and second, that the act of participation by such communities is inherently a healthier form of democracy.

Yet the profound social and economic changes of the last fifty years have fragmented communities, ruptured solidarities and encouraged the rise of individualism. The risk of community participation being taken over by the loud, articulate, leisured and privileged underlines the importance of the vote and a system of representative democracy which always retains the option of chucking the powerful out of power as the most important form of empowerment of the individual yet devised.

Other constraints apply to how far non-governmental organisations or other expressions of the community can take over the delivery of public services. Theoretically, there is no reason why public services must be delivered by employees of the state and this government has been exploring how voluntary organisations can be enlisted to do provide public services. This this has recently also begun to surface in speeches by Conservative politicians.

Voluntary organisations can bring specialist knowledge and sensitivity to the needs of their clients which are sometimes lacking from more traditional vehicles of delivering public services. But they are constrained in how far they can move into this area. Public services spend public money and that process must be accountable to the public. Accountability creates inevitable tensions when non-governmental organisations deliver public services. Politicians who remain accountable for public services will never wish to relinquish

control – nor should they. Responsibility without control is imprudent for the individual and clouds the transparency of the process for the public. Equally, the more non-governmental organisations become involved in delivering political objectives – and all public service delivery represents political choices about priorities – the more risk they run of compromising their special strengths which derive, at least in part, from their separation from government and politicians.

New information and communications technologies and the commodification of email have triggered interest in the use of electronic plebiscites to empower the citizen more directly. The internet is transforming politics. And we are just at the start of its potential to do so. The last American presidential election its power to mobilise campaigning. And this is likely to start spilling over more and more into direct influence on the legislative process.

It is not difficult to imagine a situation where a millionaire, uutraged by a brutal murder of a child launches a campaign to bring back capital punishment. A standard format email is made available on the internet to be sent with a couple of clicks to the House of Commons and every MP with a marginal seat is deluged with many thousands of emails – repeated weekly until they fall into line.

But politicians must ignore participatory panaceas, hold their nerve and live with the consequences of change. The twentieth century taught terrible lessons about the risks of plebiscitary democracy. The great merit of representative democracy is the space it gives for deliberation. Instant decisions are rarely good ones, whether made by politicians or the population at large. Short-term empowerment of voters through the plebiscite, except in narrowly defined and restricted areas, can lead to repentance at length. Ask the Germans who lived through the 1930s. Ask the Californians who voted to restrict property taxes and gave their politicians a budget problem that they still struggle with 25 years later, which is damaging Arnold Schwarzenegger's once blooming political career and which has shackled the state's education system.

Deliberative polling shows how space for reflection and debate, such as that offered through representative democracy, can produce different decisions at the end of a process – and ones with which the participants end up being more comfortable. Representative democracy depends on the exercise of power by delegating it through the vote and then allowing space for deliberation about its deployment.

Representative democracy offers space for the scrutiny and deliberation and reflection, which makes for better policy and for the articulation of the needs and aspirations of the inarticulate and the protection of the interests of minorities, all of which are hallmarks of decent and civilised societies.

Direct, participatory democracy is always at risk of being hijacked by the loudest and most powerful and articulate. Representative democracy depends on the great equalising mechanism of the vote, possessed by every citizen and giving each of us the opportunity to exercise power. However imperfect and sporadic, the act of voting has the supreme virtue of being able to throw out the rascals and that is a fundamental power that should never be degraded.

Nevertheless, fashionable preoccupations should not overshadow the way judicious use of these innovations can enrich our democracy. The sorts of techniques pioneered in Porto Alegre, where citizens directly participate in the formulation of budgets and in monitoring their delivery, have much to recommend them and could usefully be pursued as part, but only part, of a mix of reforms, and only as long as they did not jeopardise the fundamentals of representative democracy.

For example, for all the continuing debate about *how* and *where* public finance should be raised and spent, few question *who* should be doing this. Even radical proposals for devolving spending to professionals still tend to see money flowing down channels set by politicians. For all its merits, for example, the choice agenda in public services, so industriously being pursued by politicians of all parties, still treats people as consumers with only limited rights. The scope and extent of the choice is still determined by governments and local authorities which exercise largely unfettered executive authority between elections.

A more pluralist system would give the *people* back direct control over some public spending, instead of *politicians* making all the decisions about it. Every year, say two million pounds, from the amount allocated to every constituency, a sum in total amounting to less than one per cent of average spending by each local authority, could be returned to voters to spend directly by voting between different options. For any proposal to be considered, it would need to get the support of, say, at least 5,000 voters in a petition to be entered into the ballot.

All qualifying options would then be voted upon in an annual referendum which would represent a

mandate to the local authority to deliver the people's choice for spending the £2 million. To encourage participation in this new process, if no options were put forward then the money would return to central government.

In this way, none of this money could be spent unless it demonstrably commanded popular support and it would be the people, not politicians, who directly defined the options and set the priorities. At the same time, voters would be drawn into the process of making the hard choices their politicians have to make.

To complete the process, a panel, selected randomly from, the electoral register, would monitor the implementation of the spending and issue an annual report on it which the local authority would be bound to issue along with its other communications to the electorate.

Such local financial plebiscites are not – and should not become – a substitute for representative democracy. Constitutional checks and balances, administrative flexibility and the need, in the interests of national cohesion and social justice, to ensure that every community in the country receives its fair share, all argue for continuing with the pluralism of our current arrangements.

But such an initiative could provide a valuable extra strand in it and also help transform our political culture. Every year there would be a direct financial incentive for people who want to change their neighbourhoods to become involved in political activity, away from the bureaucratic sterility of so much party politics. For them, democratic politics could begin to mean something valuable again.

The moral community

The common thread that ties together the drawbacks to marketising public services, localism and communitarianism is politics. All these potential solutions to the problems with the state run up against fundamental political questions of accountability and consent. And the best way yet found to resolve these issues is representative democracy. The issue is how best to renew our political system, not how to replace it.

The starting point must be the moral community we all inhabit. All political systems are founded in such a moral community, a framework of common purpose. But not all moral communities are identical. Some can be relatively restricted in their scope, limited for example to a common interest in security. But for the left, in pursuit of equity, the moral community must be broader and more generous in its scope, representing a shared sense of destiny between voters, a moral community not necessarily defined by geography or class but by shared sentiments of mutual and reciprocal respect and obligation, which might flow from class or geography but need not do so, characterised by a sense of duty and trust that others will also do their duty.

Any moral community flows from the sense of identity of its members - where they feel they belong, to whom they feel they owe their loyalty and from whom they feel they derive rights. For most, their identity is plural. It derives from their own personal history, their family and friendships, neighbourhood, region and country. Gender, age, sexuality and ethnicity can all play a part in identity.

Few feel that any of these characteristics define them exclusively. And their relative importance will ebb and flow over time, in response to changing circumstances. So, too, our sense of the moral community to which we belong will ebb and flow. At one time, we will feel most intensely our obligation to a parent or partner. At others, it will be to victims of a tsunami or famine.

There is a basic human yearning to belong to such a community. It gives us faith in something important beyond our own mortality. Fifty per cent of British people volunteer at least once a month, for example, making a contribution to a wider moral community, formally or informally.

But it is fundamental for the Left that political identity and a rich and generous moral community map onto each other. Only then will voters accept the role of the state in delivering an egalitarian agenda. Without such a moral community, equity is not reciprocal, becoming reduced to unresponsive 20th century welfarism or modern Tory paternalism, tossing coins to the needy and without such reciprocity. Fairness can only be secured when individuals feel they share a common destiny, especially at a time of rapid, radical change.

And such a moral community should exist between generations as well as within them: a vertical moral community, alongside a horizontal one, would mend the fracture between decisions taken today for today and those decisions that must be taken now for a more distant future, involving sacrifices today for a better tomorrow. Decisions that will shape tomorrow's world – about, for example, climate change, population

growth and pension provision – require change in the prevailing culture of immediate gratification and self-fulfilment. Sloganising is easy and usually masks an evasion of tough choices, while effective decisions on such vital issues for the century ahead can only be made if there is a sense of obligation to those generations yet to come, a moral community of present and future.

The fundamental task for the Left is to construct the political mechanisms to sustain such a moral community. As RH Tawney wrote in *Equality*, social institutions 'should be planned as far as is possible, to emphasise and strengthen the common humanity which unites them' (Tawney, 1931). And the nation state remains at the heart of this task.

Britishness

A moral community cannot exist unless people feel they belong to it. The yearning to belong has always been a motor of history. In the midst of change, we all need to feel we are secured somewhere and the nation state remains the anchor of belonging. That is why national identity lies at the heart of marrying the moral and political communities. So much of what roots us, politically, economically and culturally, flows from the nation state – our systems of education and health, justice, broadcasting and our political institutions. The ties that bind us, that root us in our own place and time, our shared language, culture, social and political institutions and norms are derived from the nation state. In the midst of change, we cling onto the comfortable and familiar.

It has been argued that the political importance of British national identity is waning in the face of the great global transformations of the last fifty years. The rapid dissolution of the British Empire removed the institutions and symbols which had been so instrumental in defining Britishness. Globalisation and growing economic interdependence has turned economies outward and increased the importance of multilateral institutions of governance. The growing ubiquity of air travel and television has driven cultural change, as a new global consciousness takes root. Conversely, the new politics of identity deriving from individual characteristics such as gender and sexuality has turned consciousness inwards to the individual and not outward towards the nation.

But for all this the nation survives and remains the key location of political identity. The destabilising effects of rapid, global change which appear to threaten it also make it more important to individuals. Rapid and radical change makes people seek to root themselves in the familiar. It is not surprising that the dreadful shock of what happened on 9/11 caused such an upsurge in patriotic feeling among Americans as they sought a mooring in an unexpected and savage storm. A coherent sense of national identity remains the anchor of any moral community that deliver the values of the Left. Any politics that ignores it will end up fighting this most persistent of loyalties and suffer damage as a consequence.

Sustaining national identity is therefore a crucial task. But who we are is shaped by the interaction of complex phenomena and trying to pin down identity is extraordinarily difficult. Surveys of popular opinion often locate it in current television series or pop songs but when academics or politicians have tried to root it in something less ephemeral and more lastingly significant, it has proved a highly contentious exercise, as Samuel Huntingdon found recently with his book on identity in the United States (Huntington, 2004). Somehow, as soon as it is pinned down and defined it immediately loses its specificity. In 'The Identity of France', Ferdinand Braudel describes how he once spoke to an academic conference of the 'unparalleled diversity' of France and was then forced to recognise that Germany, Spain UK could all lay similar claims to such diversity (Braudel, 1989).

How can the individual components of identity be isolated and defined in a way that reflects each country's unique identity? Its geography? Why have Britain's islands given us such a different character from Japan's? Its faith? Has Catholicism given Mexico and Italy similar identities? Institutions? Values? As Roger Scruton has written: 'when people discard, ignore or mock the ideals which formed their national character – then they no longer exist as a people but only as a crowd' (Scruton, 2000: 67).

Such ideals are the glue for what Benedict Anderson described as the 'imagined community' of the nation. But what gives each nation the distinct identity which everyone recognises but finds so hard to define is the infinitely rich and complex way all these things interact – and critically how they interact through the passage of time and events and are reflected through our institutions.

It is becoming fashionable to retreat from the idea of being British. Of course, devolution has changed things and it is hardly surprising that an English consciousness has risen in response to the new national

consciousness elsewhere in the United Kingdom. It is more surprising that Englishness has not asserted itself more vigorously. The survey for British Social Attitudes 2000 found that only 17 per cent of people in England saw themselves as exclusively English. Although this was up from seven per cent in 1997, the same survey also found a decline in those who saw themselves as more English than British from 17 per cent in 1997 to 15 per cent in 1999 (Curtice and Heath, 2000).

Notwithstanding all the profound changes of the last century, being British remains woven into those layers of loyalty – to neighbourhood, to region and to country – that most of us still feel and that lies at the heart of our national identity. This is more than an obvious statement of the constitutional position. It reflects fundamental truths about our national identity which is essentially a plural one. The nation state is the United Kingdom, a union of four different nations, joined since the end of the Second World War by distinctive cultures from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. It is this pluralism that distinguishes our British identity from the other allegiances we feel to one or other of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom.

Of course, the idea of plural identities is not unique to the United Kingdom. Everyone, everywhere, has such plural allegiances – layers of loyalty, spreading out from the intense attachments to family and friends to local political loyalties to national allegiances. Everyone has sets of overlapping identities: our own individual personality and the identity that we gain from our relationships with others: family, friends, village or town, region and nation.

But because of the special constitutional arrangements, tested over centuries, by which four nations, with distinctive cultural identities, have been bound together in one United Kingdom, there is something distinctively British in the way such plural allegiances are important to us and reflect and shape much of our national life. The fact that our specifically British identity still matters today, decades after the end of the Empire which was once supposed to be its sustaining life-force suggests that, whether Britishness has evolved through the mists of time or was a construct created by myth-making politicians, it has come to possess an organic life of its own. For all the problems we have faced, Britain has come to be a remarkably successful experiment in multi-national and multi-cultural living. Its constitutional arrangements are plural and flexible and plurality and flexibility are essential to meet the challenges of change.

But for too long, the British have been too apologetic about Britishness. Public policy needs to recognise its importance in ways other countries recognise their identities. Many Whitehall departments, including the Home Office, the Department for Education and Skills, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Department of Constitutional Affairs and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, not to mention the BBC, all spend money in ways which can critically affect national identity and popular views about it.

All these departments should be given the task of promoting pride in this country as one of their goals. This is not a prescriptive task, dictating the precise sources of such pride. Rather, it is a task of opening the issue up to dialogue between government and governed on this crucial issue. Not to do this is implicitly to signal a lack of pride or embarrassment about our identity. We have no reason to feel like this and it is important that we should not.

There is more of symbolic value that we could – and should – be doing. We should have a national day as a bank holiday. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should establish routes for walkers and cyclists and motorists that take them on pilgrimages through sites of historical significance for our nation. The honours system should be reformed so that it honours service more than status. We do not promote a sense of a moral community when simply making money which is then donated to a political party is honoured more highly than a lifetime of selfless nursing or teaching.

But to feel that sense of belonging which is at the heart of national identity, people must not only feel they are at home culturally, they must also feel they belong socially and economically. The role of the state in securing the nation is not confined to shielding it from physical danger. It now includes the delivery of economic and social opportunity. If belonging is to mean anything significant to its citizens, the United Kingdom must be able to demonstrate – practically and daily – its value as a political arrangement to all its citizens. If a nation does not meet the economic and social needs of all its citizens, we should not be surprised if some cultural and emotional allegiances are ambivalent and if those plural allegiances which historically have provided a rich and healthy politics can sometimes lead to confusion, alienation and conflict. And this must remain a driving force for Labour's continuing programme of economic and social justice.

Britishness is central to our national identity and, while it remains a robust component of our sense of ourselves, it is changing. Devolution has created a new constitutional process, what Robert Hazell has described as 'the continuing dynamism of constitutional reform'. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have unfinished business and there remains the unresolved question of England's place in this evolving settlement (Hazell, 2006).

There is little popular appetite for an English Parliament and the British constitution has always been asymmetrical between the constituent nations, reflecting the huge dominance of England within the United Kingdom – over 80 per cent of the population and the seats in the Westminster Parliament. Few dispute that the constitutional provision needed to protect the minority nations in the United Kingdom does not have to be reflected in identical provision for the dominant partner. Nevertheless devolution contains unfinished business that should form an integral part of the constitutional reform that now demands urgent attention.

A new covenant

A moral community, rooted in loyalty and pride in our nation, is fundamental in building political consent to the pursuit of equity. But it is not sufficient. The political manifestation of that community, in our system of representative democracy, must also command the consent of voters. To do that, it must be sufficiently transparent and accountable to inspire trust that it is representative and democratic. Today, the disengagement and disillusion of voters suggests these qualities are inadequately present in our political system and there is a growing realisation among the political class that something must be done about it.

Any constitutional settlement is going to require a continuing three-way partnership between central and local government and the people. Equally clearly, though, the nature of that relationship is changing, and, in my view, should change radically further. But in recent years, the outline of the necessary constitutional change that is emerging into public discourse contains three main components.

First is reform of the legislature, completing reform of the House of Lords, accompanied by a strengthening and redefinition of its functions in scrutinising legislation.

Second is rebalancing power between the legislature and the executive, although, in discussing this, it is important to distinguish between striking the correct balance between the different parts of our constitution and fashionable blather decrying the power of the executive. Too often this reflects not a genuine worry about the checks and balances of the constitution but the whingeing of those who have not secured sufficient popular support to exercise power themselves. A powerful executive is essential for effective government. The debate would soon change if a neutered executive led to legislative gridlock and measures that citizens felt were important for their security and prosperity were stalled. The object of reform should not be to emasculate the executive, as might be thought from the pontifications of some politicians, but to ensure it is made more open and accountable on the basis that transparent and accountable government is better government.

Third is restoring trust in the political class by measures to tackle the popular view that politicians are only in politics for themselves.

If Parliament cannot move rapidly and radically to reform the constitutional settlement in a way that manifestly commands public confidence (and a process carried out by discredited professionals could taint the outcome and cause voters to doubt the credibility of any renewal of the system), then the time may be coming for the people themselves to assume the task.

A one-off, fixed term, constitutional convention could be called, to be directly elected at the next General Election, to explore and decide on the measures needed to rejuvenate not just Parliament but our constitutional arrangements as a whole.

To avoid domination by the political class, only those who had never stood for Parliament could be eligible to stand as candidates. Although, for reasons of administrative efficiency, the elections could be mapped onto existing constituency boundaries, there is no need for there to be as many delegates as there are MPs. It would be hard to justify the expense of more than half as many to perform such a tightly defined and temporary task. Although it would be democratically eccentric to prevent existing political parties fielding candidates, there could be a tight limit on election expenses, and national publicity would be prohibited, to prevent them monopolising the process.

The remit for the Convention could be to assess the state of the constitutional settlement and make proposals for change which would ratified by a referendum to be held within three years of the Convention being elected. To encourage consensus and promote the credibility of its conclusions among the wider public, no measure could be passed unless it commanded the support of two-thirds of the delegates.

It could be serviced by a secretariat, with all proceedings open to the public. Deliberative polling, charting the responses of delegates to the proceedings and the information that was presented to them, would be carried out throughout the process to enhance its credibility, not least by helping to temper the ability of political parties to whip into line any delegates elected on their ticket.

Its remit could include validating the rebalancing of the powers between executive and legislature previously carried out by Parliament or completing the process if Parliament had failed to do so. It could seek to reach resolution of the debate over electoral reform and include a decision on the merits of a written constitution. It could explore how both Houses of Parliament should be composed. It could address the delineation of boundaries between central and local government and how local government should be funded.

It could explore the implications of devolution and what, if anything, remained to be done to complete the process and whether the position of England within the United Kingdom should be changed, to reflect the changes to the positions of Scotland and Wales and potentially, Northern Ireland, and if so, how.

The final element for the Convention to consider in constructing a new constitutional settlement could be how best directly to empower of people in decision-taking, without compromising the benefits of representative democracy.

Absolved from partisan politics and secure in the knowledge of the limits of their time in office, delegates could afford to look at these complex issues more freshly and objectively than career politicians have felt able to do. It could weigh the arguments, such as those advanced by Charter 88 that a codified constitution would empower the citizen against the arguments that codification would prove contentious and expensive of legislative time and political capital and give too much power to judges.

It could tackle some highly sensitive issues of local government: why, for example, do local authorities need to deliver education and social services, when no national government is going to allow significant deviations from a centrally formulated framework? It could explore why there should not be directly elected boards responsible and accountable to voters for their operational decisions.

Equally, it could examine why the sensitive and important power of planning should not be returned to local authorities on the grounds that if the case for a development is compelling on public policy grounds, then in a healthy democracy, with the appropriate mechanisms for deliberation, the arguments ought to be able to be made in a way that persuades voters. If there is a national interest in a development taking place in a particular locality, then the nation ought to be able to produce the appropriate incentives to persuade that locality to accommodate it. And if it didn't, it is worth remembering that the arguments for democracy have rarely been made on the grounds that it axiomatically reaches the right decisions, evaluated technocratically.

And the Convention could examine the case for and against tackling the domination of the legislature by career politicians with measures such as term limits and the age restrictions proposed, for example, by the Power Report for a reformed House of Lords.

These are all difficult and contentious issues but, in many ways, they go to the heart of the current disengagement and disillusion with the way our democracy operates. Solutions scull around but they remain the property of the political class, politicians and political thinkers. As long as they are confined within the Westminster village they seem to do little to rejuvenate our democracy.

The process of electing a Convention to resolve these issues could confer much needed credibility on constitutional reform. Instead of the political class agreeing among themselves what people need, people themselves would decide by empowering a unique assembly of their representatives to take these fundamental decisions. Whatever the outcome of the Convention, this process of empowering an alternative to the political class about something so important could invigorate our democracy.

Much of the work of the Convention would be technical and may have little resonance in every day life. But the fact that it was being carried out by a new cadre of democratically elected representatives, independent of the familiar political class, could create its own interest. Beneath the technical issues lie concerns about power

and who should exercise it and these are of fundamental importance to everyone in this country.

It may well be that such a Convention would fail to agree on anything or that voters would reject in the subsequent referendum any proposals on which they did agree. It is also the case that the remit for the Convention, sketched here, is very wide and it might be difficult for any referendum sensibly to give voters a simple choice of accepting or rejecting such a broad settlement. And splitting up the Convention's decisions into sets of discrete proposals may well create problems of unwieldiness and complexity.

But neither is the status quo acceptable. If tinkering round the edges by the political classes failed to carry credibility, then a fatalistic acceptance of the current situation would be culpable. Through a Constitutional Convention at least voters would have the opportunity to change their political arrangements. If they – or their directly elected representatives – refused to make change, then that at least might reassure voters that the current arrangements are the least bad option and, in recognising that, create what would amount to a new settlement (not in the sense of new arrangements but of renewed acceptance of the current ones).

There are likely to be two main categories of argument against such a convention. The first is that it is not needed. But few dispute the need for constitutional reform nor the mistrust of politicians by voters. If it is believed that politicians can decide the constitutional arrangements which determine how they serve the country and that such a decision will carry the credibility needed to reinvigorate the system, then, clearly, there is no need for such a convention. But if it is believed that mistrust of the political class is now running so deep and strong that something more radical is needed to reconstruct our democracy, then a Constitutional Convention may provide an answer.

The second potential argument is that while there may be a need for such a Convention, it is not sufficient to justify the cost and the burden on voters. But the burden on voters can be mitigated by combining the election of the convention with a general election. The cost could be significantly reducing by housing the convention in the Houses of Parliament when they are not sitting – currently over four months a year plus Fridays and Saturdays.

Our constitution performs its functions. Compared with much of the world and our own history, our democracy is healthy. But it is failing increasingly to reflect the aspirations and hopes of voters. Above all it disconnects power from people in ways that are increasingly resented. The Constitutional Convention suggested here would be non-partisan – rightly and inevitably so. But developing and promoting it and ensuring that it happens could be a powerful statement of commitment to the reinvigoration of democracy in this country.

The pursuit of equity never ends but it does progress. If it is to continue to do so over the next ten years, the Left must regain its political vigour and refresh its appeal to voters. New policies for new challenges and new language for new times are essential but voters will not listen unless they regain their trust that the system is working for them. Nothing will demonstrate that more clearly than making our democracy more transparent and accountable. And the time may well be ripe for the people to take that task away from the political class. It is vital for the future of the Left that, on the issue of power and how it is distributed in a democracy, it positions itself on the right side of the barricades.

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