

**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY NOW

**WHY COMMUNITARIANISM PROVIDES
THE ROADMAP THE LEFT NEEDS TODAY**

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SOCIETY**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This pamphlet argues that the communitarian strand of Fabian thinking can provide social democrats with a powerful roadmap through the huge political challenges of the 2020s.

Communitarianism has long been part of the Fabian story, most notably developed by GDH Cole and RH Tawney. But up until now it has been a subplot, in the shadow of the big-state, democratic collectivism associated with the Webbs.

The complex nature of our current social, economic and environmental problems means the time has come for it to move to the foreground, and give distinctive shape to the first Labour government in 14 years.

In this telling, equality remains the core concept for social democrats – the ultimate ‘ends’ around which the creed should be organised. However, it should not be narrowly understood in terms of income, outcome or opportunity. It is equality of *power* that social democrats should seek today – the ability to live our lives together, in our communities, in the way we choose.

Achieving this goal will require social democrats to understand the state can be both an ally and an enemy, and therefore must take action in the right places, in the right way. This does not mean the state doing less, but it does mean the state doing things differently – supporting and shaping, inspiring and incubating, rather than directing and delivering, commanding and controlling.

To help define what this might mean in practice, this pamphlet reviews a range of communitarian intellectual resources:

The revisionist tradition. Chapter 2 argues that if writing *The Future of Socialism* today, the great Fabian thinker Tony Crosland would have put much greater emphasis on community and what he called the “co-operative aspiration”.

Over a century's worth of Fabian communitarian thinking; in particular, the work of GDH Cole and RH Tawney. Chapter 3 argues that it is time to reverse the balance of history and bring these “democratic republicans” into the social democratic mainstream.

The experience of the New Labour government, which developed a significant communitarian policy agenda, particularly through its neighbourhood renewal programme, its support for community ownership and its approach to “double devolution”, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Policy and practice developments over the last decade and a half, which have surfaced some rich concepts, rooted in communitarianism, as discussed in Chapter 5. Together, they provide social democrats with fertile ground to grow a revisionist project for the 2020s.

The pamphlet concludes in Chapter 6 by drawing these strands together into a potential policy framework for a communitarian revisionist social democracy, where a guiding focus on equality of power shapes three broad policy spheres:

A powerful economy

Core communitarian concepts: economic democracy, stakeholder capitalism, the foundational economy, community ownership, community economic development, community wealth building.

Powerful public services

Core communitarian concepts: the relational state, radical help, the community paradigm, asset-based community development, co-production, 'keep it local.'

A powerful democracy

Core communitarian concepts: participatory democracy, neighbourhood governance, deliberative democracy.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF IDEOLOGY

Early in last year's general election campaign, Keir Starmer was asked if he would describe himself as a "socialist."¹ It's a question that has long been posed to Labour leaders. Here though, the question was lent a particular "gotcha" element, mere weeks from polling day and with Starmer's political project focused on moving Labour to the centre-ground of British politics after Jeremy Corbyn.

Starmer, however, was quick to answer in the affirmative:

"I would describe myself as a socialist. I describe myself as a progressive. I'd describe myself as somebody who always puts the country first and party second."

Understandably in the context, the question was taken as an opportunity to pivot to a core campaign message, rather than conduct a seminar on socialism. Election campaigns are not the place for deep ideological debates.

It is, however, important that political parties have them.

In the early 20th century, RH Tawney argued that this kind of exploration goes against the grain of the national psyche. As a country we are "incurious to theory, take fundamentals for granted, and are more interested in the state of the roads than in their place on a map."² Today, our present political moment further incentivises a focus on the practical. The sheer pace of Labour's political turnaround over recent years – from its worst electoral defeat since 1935 to a historic landslide victory – means there has not been much space for reflective conversations about the nature of social democracy. The party's three step plan – detoxifying Labour; retoxifying the Tories; and finally putting a positive case to the country – was brutally efficient. It swept Labour to power before many of its thinkers had finished sharpening their pencils.

In government, the party is now under huge pressure to “deliver change”, faced with a daunting political inheritance and now a rapidly shifting global order. It is unlikely to pause for breath anytime soon. The space for a deep ideas debate feels limited; if there wasn’t time to have one in opposition, then things are even more accelerated now.

But as Tawney went on to say: “it is not enough to follow the road. It is necessary to know where it leads.” And this maxim is particularly important when in government. At the end of Labour’s last period in office, James Purnell and Graeme Cooke reflected that New Labour’s “ideological flexibility” brought the party “three major disadvantages in government”:³ it made prioritisation difficult when Labour was faced with difficult choices; it created “blind spots” that left important issues on the back burner; and, with no clear thread to connect policies together, it made it hard to create an enduring electoral coalition.

Ideology, they concluded, “gives you an intellectual roadmap. It is vital for working out what you want to do with power, where to prioritise in government, and how to win support”.⁴

So while it might feel a bit ethereal to be thinking about ideology with Labour finally in power, this is not just a concern for the chin-strokers. Being ideologically light comes with real world political risks.

The party may well feel it lacks the capacity right now for such an exploration of its intellectual underpinnings. Fortunately, though, it has the Fabian Society to draw upon, which has been precisely the place where these debates have taken place over the course of its 140-year history. And this pamphlet argues that the Fabians have a specific role to play in this most crucial moment for the left; for the Fabian tradition contains many of the answers to the problems facing a Labour government entering office in the mid-2020s.

Social democratic revisionism and the Fabian tradition

There has been much soul searching about the purpose of social democracy in an era of extreme fiscal constraint. What’s the point of social democracy without any money to spend?

This has been the key exam question since the fall of the New Labour government, and there has been much good thinking since.⁵ But it has been an essentially defensive debate, which has accepted that social democracy’s aims and methods remain broadly as they were: greater equality and social

justice achieved through the exercise of central state power. The response has been either to explore how to generate resources to fund a more full-throated social democracy, or to set out how the state can intervene without spending money.

But this focus on finances has obscured what is arguably social democracy's bigger problem. For even if the financial crisis had not taken the wind out of its sails, social democracy would have been due a rethink over the last decade and a half. This is because it has become increasingly clear that its traditional reliance on the central state is no longer the appropriate means to achieve progress in our world of complexity.

While this is a daunting challenge, there are good answers to be found deep in social democracy's own traditions – specifically, this pamphlet argues, within the Fabian tradition.

The pamphlet therefore begins by exploring the social democratic tradition of “revisionism”, making the case that we are in a moment when social democracy needs to again explore its foundational “ends” and consider its appropriate “means”. It then goes on to delve deep into the Fabian tradition – and argues that its oft-submerged communitarianism provides the right focus for social democrats today.

A communitarian moment for the left has been brewing for some time. This pamphlet explores where we can find it in Labour's last period in government, and the vibrant communitarian debate and practice that took place during 14 years of opposition, before drawing these threads together into the outlines of a communitarian policy agenda.

At its core, this remains a conversation about the two abiding concerns for social democrats: greater equality, and the role of the state in achieving it. But it is no longer enough to think about equality in narrow economic terms, or as something that can be advanced simply through central state action. Instead, to tackle the complex challenges of today, it is equality of *power* that the left must seek – and the role of the state must be to support power to spread through all spheres of life. The pamphlet sets out what this might look like across three core areas:

- A powerful economy.
- Powerful public services.
- A powerful democracy.

This agenda can inform Labour's statecraft in government, and help it overcome the huge challenges it faces, while rebuilding long-term trust with the electorate.

2. THE CASE FOR REVISIONISM

“Revisionists revise”: so concluded the Labour peer David Lipsey when exploring the impact of Tony Crosland’s thinking on the New Labour government in 1998.⁶ Crosland remains a heroic figure for Fabians nearly 50 years after his untimely death, and *The Future of Socialism* is still the apotheosis of revisionist social democracy.

Rereading Crosland today, it is not hard to understand why his influence endures. For all its erudition and weightiness, *The Future of Socialism* is a surprisingly good read. It is stacked full of elegant turns of phrase and slightly catty asides, as Crosland dispatches various opponents across the left whose ideas he thinks lack the requisite rigour. Crosland himself cuts a dashing, romantic figure, with his *joie-de-vivre* captured in *The Future of Socialism*’s most famous passages. Its concluding critique of the “grey-on-grey statism”⁷ of the Webbs sees him claim the good life for socialists, focusing on “personal freedom, happiness and cultural endeavour”, with the goal of making “Britain a more colourful and civilised country to live in.”⁸

Approaching its 70th anniversary, *The Future of Socialism* stands as a powerful call for revisionism: being clear-eyed about the ultimate ends and principles of social democracy, then thinking through how they can be most effectively applied to modern conditions.

Crosland was writing after the seismic impact of Attlee’s Labour government, which had transformed Britain and brought it to a point of broadly social democratic political consensus. In Crosland’s view, “a rather high proportion of traditional objectives” were now “substantially achieved” – such as the elimination of “primary poverty” and the achievement of full employment.

This meant the left was wasting energy fighting battles that were already won. Crosland bemoaned “conservative or indolent-minded people on the left, finding the contemporary scene too puzzling and unable to mould it into the old familiar categories, are inclined to seek refuge in the slogans and ideas of 50 years ago.”

There was, therefore, “the need for a restatement”. For Crosland this famously reframed social democracy around the “ends” of equality over the “means” of nationalisation.

Over time, the clarity of this characterisation has become lost to a fuzzier formulation; that revisionism means “the ends are everything and the means don’t matter”. This is most present in debates about the extent to which the New Labour government should be seen as a revisionist social democratic project, versus those who think it best viewed as an accommodation with Thatcherism.⁹ Gordon Brown is probably the biggest proponent of the former view, locating his Treasury-led attack on relative poverty through fiscal transfers firmly in Labour’s Croslandite tradition.¹⁰ However, there comes a point where lack of interest in means can lead them to become unmoored from ends. For example, New Labour’s laissez-faire attitude to the economy and intense relaxation about wealth meant that making progress on overall levels of equality ultimately eluded them.

What Crosland really teaches us is the need for precise thinking. The great triumph of *The Future of Socialism* is that it provides social democrats with a framework for thinking through what they want to achieve and how best to do it in the times they live in. He trawls the “traditions of British socialism” to pull out five “basic socialist aspirations” by which the creed and its correct contemporary focus can be comprehensively assessed.

It is first worth noting that Crosland’s framework comes with a caveat. He was working on the basis that many of the traditional goals of the left had already been achieved, or at least set in train, by the post-war Labour government. He warns that if a Tory government were to recreate “all of the old evils” then there would be a need to recalibrate and refocus on the fundamentals of social justice. Crosland was confident, however, that it was “not likely that the Tories would act so recklessly”.

Social democrats today might feel differently, and decide to give more focus to the first of Crosland’s five “basic socialist aspirations”: “a protest against the material poverty and physical squalor which capitalism produced.” Crosland was writing at a time when economic growth had been transformative, real incomes were rising rapidly¹¹ and social democrats could feel confident that extreme, absolute poverty was a thing of the past. Today, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s work on deep poverty and destitution shows in no uncertain terms that this “old evil” has returned. They have found that 3.8 million people – 1 million of them children – experience destitution, the most severe form of hardship. This means people are unable to meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed.¹² These numbers are rapidly accelerating, with the number of

destitute households more than doubling between 2017 and 2022. The exponential growth of food bank use is another indicator. The Trussell Trust had around 35 food bank centres in 2010/11¹³; by 2023/24, that number was nearly 1,700.¹⁴ These shocking statistics suggest a sad conclusion: that tackling hardship and poverty must return to the forefront of social democracy's mission in the 2020s.

Crosland's next three aspirations, though, are where he put his focus:

“a wider concern for ‘social welfare’ – for the interests of those in need or oppressed”

“a belief in equality and the ‘classless society’”

“a rejection of competitive antagonism, and an ideal of fraternity and co-operation.”

Crosland homes in on the first two aspirations in particular: social welfare and greater equality. He analyses these topics with vigour, dissecting the welfare state, the education system and our wider economic underpinnings in search of precisely where social democrats could make the most difference. Within this thinking, there remains much that is valuable today. Indeed Labour's mission to “break down barriers to opportunity,” with a focus on the education system, is a contemporary echo of Crosland's clearest policy prescription: giving children “equal chance of access to the best education”.

Less often discussed is Crosland's fourth aspiration, which he recognises as hugely important, but affords little consideration. He calls it “the cooperative aspiration”, but today we might call it “community power”.

As he explains:

“I propose to discuss the co-operative aspiration first, in order to get it out the way – not because I think its content less important, but simply because I find it impossible to reach a definite conclusion about its relevance in contemporary conditions”.

Here Crosland puts his Fabian instincts on display. His most famous lines may well have been his critique of the Webbs and their “good filing-system”,¹⁵ but he betrays a similar preference for the orderly and categorisable. Crosland wants to analyse clearly and be sure the solutions follow. Anything less cannot be committed to.

Crosland's contention was that Britain had become “a markedly less competitive society than it was a century ago”, with the nationalisation of

industry, in particular, changing the nature of the economy. Indeed, he concludes “there is now probably no country in the world where competition is less aggressive... To a large extent, security has replaced competition as the guiding role of economic conduct.” This is jarring to readers today, post-Thatcherism, where competition has defined not just our economic model, but increasingly our public services, too.

Crosland’s lack of certainty about whether or not social democrats should be concerned with social cooperation was because he could not be sure how things were playing out. He clearly had his suspicions about the extent to which nationalisation was really putting power in people’s hands; he wrote that: “the scale is too large, and the distances too remote”. He recognised that: “public ownership is not enough. We might even require a complete devolution and fragmentation of economic activity down to a local scale”. Yet he backs away from developing this thought on grounds of practicality, along with the telltale fear of the managerialist, that small groups will act in self-serving and uncooperative ways.

Crosland would like to be able to “harness the group instinct in such a way as to create the desired social and co-operative atmosphere ... Unfortunately, we scarcely know in detail how this is to be done”.

The good news for social democrats today is that we now have a much clearer picture. There is a distinctive intellectual tradition to draw on, developed over the years within the Fabian Society; we have good examples of how the last Labour government put some of it into practice; and during Labour’s time in opposition from 2010, there was a rich seam of ideas development, policy thinking and practical experimentation.

So it is the contention of this pamphlet that if writing now, Crosland would have thought much harder about this aspect of *The Future of Socialism*. The next section explores this thread in more detail.

Interestingly, Crosland’s fifth and final aspiration is one which he dismissed for similar reasons as the first – that it was broadly in hand. This was “a protest against the inefficiencies of capitalism as an economic system”. Given the economic stagnation of the last decade and longer-term challenge of the “productivity puzzle”, the question of how greater economic dynamism can drive social democratic goals has very much returned, and become the defining challenge for the current Labour government. This topic is returned to later, in chapter 6.

3. COMMUNITARIANISM AND THE FABIAN TRADITION

Crosland's ultimate dismissal of the messiness of community helps us explain why the dominant Fabian tradition has been – to follow David Marquand's formulation – the “democratic collectivism” of the Webbs, over the “democratic republicanism” of GDH Cole and RH Tawney.¹⁶

As Marquand explains: “most democratic collectivists were content with the existing state... for them it was an agent of social transformation, guided by science, reason and their own grasp of the dynamics of historical change”. The Webbs put “their faith in the sovereignty of fact” and so for them, “the drill sergeants on society's march to greater nobility and efficiency were dispassionate, objective, scientifically-trained experts who knew what the facts were.”

The democratic republicans, on the other hand, were “the awkward squad of British democracy”. While they shared the democratic collectivists' commitment to equality, “they interpreted that slippery term in a different way. They were for fellowship and dignity more than economic equality. They put their faith in the kinetic energy of ordinary citizens, and rejected the determinism that lay at the heart of the democratic collectivist tradition”.

If the Webbs are emblematic of the democratic collectivists, then GDH Cole is the figurehead for the democratic republicans within the Fabian tradition.

GDH Cole's Fabian bona fides are beyond reproach. He chaired the Fabian Society, wrote the definitive guide to the society's methods,¹⁷ and contributed numerous pamphlets.¹⁸ The society's basement meeting room at 11 Dartmouth Street was “The Cole Room”.

Yet GDH Cole is almost the antithesis of what is commonly understood as “Fabianism”, a term which is now often used as a pejorative short-hand for a bossy, centralising managerialism.

Tony Wright – Cole’s biographer and a significant Fabian democratic republican himself – explains how Cole’s “guild socialism”:

“Promised a version of socialism that was more appealing than the drab bureaucracy of the Webbs. Above all, it grasped the central point that the fundamental evil was not poverty, but slavery, which could only be remedied by a doctrine of freedom and responsibility. In other words, people had to take control of their own lives, which neither capitalism nor collectivism allowed.”¹⁹

Cole, then, combined a pluralist critique of an overbearing state with the trade union movement’s assault on capitalism, to produce “an exciting and innovative synthesis ... It was a world in which people would not have things done to them or for them, whether by capitalists or bureaucrats, but one in which they would organise things for themselves.”²⁰

Despite the vibrancy of his thinking, Cole has had less impact in mainstream social democratic debates than Crosland. One reason for this, perhaps, is that his work lacks Crosland’s singular statement of purpose. Crosland’s focus on producing a clear summary of socialist principle may have, in hindsight, undercooked some key concepts, as discussed in the previous chapter. But *The Future of Socialism* has the benefit of being an easily accessible vision, all laid out in one place. In contrast, Cole’s body of work is enormous, and there is no one core text. In addition, he is associated with a prescription – the intricate system of socialist “guilds” – which one would have to agree with Crosland “simply will not happen, and could not work, in an advanced industrial economy,”²¹ whether in 1956 or now.

The underlying ideas, however, are deeply resonant today. “Above all else”, Wright explains, “Cole was a theorist of community, as an expression of fellowship”, and so the state needed to “find its true and proper role as the instrument of community consciousness” within a community setting.²² The role of the state, therefore, is still important and proactive, but it is to shape and support, rather than control and deliver; “an agency of expression for the organised will of the community.”²³ For the democratic republicans, the state is a part of the mixture, rather than the whole of the cake.

Cole understood that we form our loyalties and bonds with each other, within groups, at a local level. This meant the state was “one functional association amongst others”. As Wright explains, for Cole the “spirit of community was a fact; the task was to give it organisational expression.”²⁴

The other key Fabian communitarian is RH Tawney. According to Marquand, Tawney was responsible for “the most resonant democratic republican utterances of the twentieth century”.²⁵

In a similar way to how Cole put the focus of socialism on “slavery” over “poverty”, Tawney is best known for claiming liberty for the left, subverting the argument that greater equality inevitably meant less freedom:

“When liberty is construed realistically, not merely a minimum of civil and political rights but securities that the economically weak will not be at the mercy of the economically strong ... a large measure of equality, so far from being inimical to liberty, is essential to it”.²⁶

Or, as he put it more pithily: “freedom for the pike is death for the minnows”.²⁷

Today Tawney is probably more frequently discussed than Cole. In 2010, James Purnell and Graeme Cooke drew directly on his 1944 essay *We Mean Freedom* to make the case for revisionism in a post-New Labour world. Here Tawney wrote that freedom can only be understood “as part of the prose of everyday life”. It can’t be conceived “in the abstract, divorced from the realities of time and place.”²⁸ It means being able to make real choices, in real life, in the context of relationships with other people. As Purnell and Cooke put it, Tawney’s goal is “real freedom, the power to do”, and his crucial insight is that “we can only reach our potential if we help each other”.²⁹

Tawney joined the Fabian Society as a young man, and authored numerous Fabian pamphlets, including one which developed one of his most famous ideas, that of the “acquisitive society”.³⁰ So while the dominant strain of Fabian thinking is the democratic collectivism of the Webbs, its main intellectual opposition also came from within the society. It is the argument of this pamphlet that it is this second strain of thought that social democrats should draw on most clearly today. It is time to reverse the historical balance, and make democratic republicanism the mainstream of social democratic thinking.

This is a process that has been taking place over the last decade. The intention of this pamphlet is to name it, and think through what it means for a Labour government today. But before that, it is worth exploring how communitarianism informed Labour’s last period in office.

4. NEW LABOUR'S COMMUNITARIANISM

Soon after the last Labour government left office, a consensus emerged about its essential character: “centralist, statist and top down”.³¹ Its core focus was on how the proceeds of a booming economy could be redirected into improved public services and tackling poverty through tax credits.

This is most clearly expressed by Gordon Brown's famous list of achievements at party conference: the shortest waiting times in history, half a million children out of poverty, child benefit at record levels, and the rest.³²

However, beneath the big state bombast lay a quieter communitarianism. Observers have noted that while New Labour's centralist statecraft prevented much devolution of power to local authorities, there was significant interest in “strengthening models of participatory, rather than representative, democracy.”³³

There are three areas of New Labour's communitarianism worth highlighting in particular: neighbourhood renewal; support for community ownership; and the “double devolution” agenda.

Neighbourhood renewal

It is now over 25 years since Labour's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. As Hilary Armstrong described it in a recent Fabian report, this was “an ambitious endeavour that aimed to place neighbourhoods at the centre of a comprehensive national economic and social revitalisation programme.”³⁴

At its heart was the New Deal for Communities (NDC). This followed in the footsteps of previous governments' “area-based initiatives” like the City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget. The NDC focused in on 39 disadvantaged neighbourhoods, providing approximately £50m over a 10-

year period for communities themselves to drive change around a number of outcomes.³⁵

The initial evaluation of the NDC programme in 2010 drew very positive conclusions about the programme's value for money and impact.³⁶ Perhaps most significantly, it has continued to improve lives long after the funding stopped flowing: a number of NDC areas used their funding to invest in physical assets, creating a platform for a long-term legacy of community enterprise.³⁷

Recent years have seen increased interest in the programme. In 2019, Local Trust published research on "what works" in local economic development, which concluded that the NDC "offers a solid model" for achieving positive economic change at the neighbourhood level.³⁸ The centre-right think tank Onward's "Turnaround" report declared the NDC "one of the more successful regeneration schemes in recent years", and highlighted its key success factors: community participation and control; investing in assets; operating at a neighbourhood-level; having a long-term time horizon.³⁹

Community ownership

Less celebrated than its neighbourhood renewal agenda, but perhaps even more significant in the long run, was how New Labour sowed the seeds of a community ownership revolution.

Owning physical assets is the key means by which local communities can build power. In places where the market has failed and the state has been unable to turn things around, local people can use an asset to earn their own income and leverage in funding in support of their own priorities.

The New Labour government gave a significant fillip to community ownership in 2003 by establishing the 'general disposal consent'; a dry, technocratic sounding name for a transformative change.⁴⁰ Before this, local authorities were required by law to sell assets at market rate. Now they were permitted to dispose of them at "less than best" or "nil consideration", if there was a social, economic or environmental benefit in doing so. This created the Community Asset Transfer mechanism, the main route through which communities now take ownership of important local buildings and spaces.⁴¹

Supporting community ownership was a continuing commitment for New Labour. The Quirk Review in 2007 outlined the "clear benefits" that could emerge from local groups owning or managing community assets.⁴² This laid the groundwork for Hazel Blears' landmark 'Communities in Control' white paper. Blears had trailed this agenda in a Fabian pamphlet of the same

name a few years previously, quoting GDH Cole as she sought to “rethink and update ‘community’ as a socialist value”, locating “decentralised community ownership” within “the historic goals of radicals, reformers and socialists”.⁴³

Her white paper embedded this vision through a range of initiatives – establishing the Community Asset Transfer Unit, creating the Communitybuilders programme to support community enterprise, encouraging participatory budgeting, and supporting the development of community land trusts.⁴⁴

This communitarian vision was further developed in the government’s 2007 Third Sector Review. This made clear that asset-owning community “anchor” organisations were key partners in achieving the government’s social justice goals and backed them with strategic long-term funding to support their development.⁴⁵

Double devolution

Along with neighbourhood renewal and community ownership, New Labour’s interest in participatory democracy sought to develop new vehicles for neighbourhood governance. Communities in Control, for instance, encouraged more “neighbourhood councils” to form below local authorities. This was a continuation of the “double devolution” agenda begun by David Miliband in his time as local government minister, which described devolution as a “deal” – but not in the Northern Powerhouse sense of the word, with central government striking agreements with sub-regional mayors. Here the deal was that local government would get more powers from central government, but would then be required to share them “with citizens, neighbourhoods and the third sector”.⁴⁶

At the heart of this plan was “the devolution of power down to the neighbourhood level”.⁴⁷ New neighbourhood structures were seen as central to building stronger partnerships between the public sector and local community groups, along with commissioning reform to support community organisations to play a bigger role in local service provision. Miliband also stressed the importance of community assets as “a critical guarantor of independence” for the voluntary and community sector (VCS). He highlighted how Labour’s pioneering change in guidance to create the Community Asset Transfer mechanism meant local government could “take a more active role in asset-building”. Miliband also called for something in 2006 that Keir Starmer made an important part of his government’s

inaugural King's Speech: "a community right to buy to enable communities first option on the sale of public or private assets."

The New Labour that wasn't

We can clearly see communitarian threads weave in and out New Labour's time in government. There was significant philosophical interest in building community power – through community assets, through neighbourhood governance, through commissioning reform – all backed through creative policy initiatives and, crucially, funding support.

It was not, however, the dominant strand of thinking which shaped the party's time in office, and was often at odds with wider central state activity. Stuart White and Martin O'Neill wrote in *Fabian Review* a decade ago of a "New Labour that wasn't";⁴⁸ a version of New Labour which could have brought its communitarian tendencies more to the fore. This would have developed its pre-power interest in "stakeholding", drawing on David Marquand, Paul Hirst and Will Hutton's complementary visions for greater pluralism and participation across our economy and our political system.

But this was not the New Labour we got, which ultimately settled on a more accommodationist political economy, with the central state intervening post hoc to redistribute, rather than acting early to reshape capitalism. As White and O'Neill explain, there was a "key strategic decision on Labour's part to accept the existing financial system ... The aim was not to try to convert British capitalism into something closer to the German model but to try to inflect the British model with a more egalitarian character."⁴⁹

As a *Political Quarterly* assessment of New Labour in power put it: "Labour's centralists won out over those who wanted to see much more devolution of power downwards".⁵⁰ However, following Labour's defeat in 2010, communitarian ideas came to the fore. Indeed, the critique of New Labour quickly became a critique of Labour's democratic collectivist tradition, with its democratic republicanism fostering a vibrant ideas debate in opposition.

The next chapter surveys the ideas, policy and practice development that happened after Labour's last period in office – for they contain many of the answers the party is searching for in its current one.

5. COMETH THE COMMUNITARIAN S

Since 2010, there has been a growing sense that communitarianism's time has come. The challenges our society has had to grapple with have grown exponentially. Even if the benign economic winds of the nineties and noughties had continued, social democracy would have required a serious reckoning with demographics, with fewer people of working age to foot the costs of an ageing society. Yet since the financial crisis of 2008, we have seen a ratcheting up of pressure on policymakers via a series of economic, social and political events that the existing model is ill-equipped to handle.

What unites our biggest challenges is their complexity. As IPPR outlined a decade ago, these are problems which have “multiple, non-linear and interconnected causes that feed off one another in unpredictable ways”, and as such are difficult to solve through top-down plans or simple market incentives.⁵¹

So innovative policy thinking has increasingly looked to communities, where responses to complex problems can be designed and built around deep and lasting relationships, with power widely dispersed, and services joined-up around individuals.

Looking back over the last 15 years, we can see two distinct phases of intellectual development that are relevant to a communitarian revision of social democracy. The first was during Labour's first term of opposition, coming to terms with seismic defeat after 13 years in power, and encouraged by Ed Miliband's interest in a broad range of ideas as leader. The second phase saw the energy shift more to civil society, local government and place-based experimentation, as Brexit dominated the intellectual bandwidth of Westminster and Labour's social democrats were focused more on internal party battles.

Labour's long period of opposition surfaced some rich concepts, rooted in communitarianism, which taken together provide social democrats with fertile ground to grow a revisionist project for the 2020s.

This chapter outlines some of the key ideas that have emerged across these two periods, before attempting to pull them together in the final section into a potential policy agenda for a communitarian-revisionist social democracy.

New ideas for a new era

We Mean Power

Soon after he left the New Labour government, James Purnell launched a project at Demos called 'Open Left'. The goal was to ask big questions about what it is to be on the left and what a twenty-first century Labour party should stand for. This was answered in the title of the project's final collection of essays: *We Mean Power*.⁵²

In their introduction to the collection, Purnell and Graeme Cooke located their work directly in Labour's "strong revisionist tradition". They drew on Tawney to make the case that revisionists should still be focused on the concept of equality, but that this should be understood as an equality of *power* rather than narrowly viewed through the prism of resources. Using this conception, equality is understood as an active concept: having agency or "the power to do".⁵³

This is not something the state can simply bestow on us through the social security system; it has to be realised in our relationships with other people. As Purnell and Cooke put it: "what is best in life is relational – family, love, work, culture, friendship – and those relationships work best when they are reciprocal".

This led to what became a much-repeated critique of the New Labour government: "too hands-off with the market and too hands-on with the state." From this challenge flowed a policy agenda of spreading power, locating it "as close as possible to the people it affects". As examples, Purnell and Cooke flagged "radical experiments", many of which became familiar over the next decade: community-led housing, elected mayors, community economic development, and participatory budgeting. They noted that social democrats had often struggled to turn these insights into a practical political agenda, writing that "the Labour tradition has always been communitarian in spirit, but not always in practice". However, these ideas, very early into Labour's long period in opposition, clarified the critique of New Labour and

set out where to look for answers: in Labour's traditions of communitarianism.

Blue Labour

If 2010's *We Mean Power* set a debate smouldering by locating its ideas explicitly within revisionist social democracy, then the touchpaper was lit by Blue Labour's rejection of it. Many of the thinkers most associated with Blue Labour contributed to *We Mean Power*: Purnell himself, Marc Stears and, most prominently, Maurice Glasman. But whereas *We Mean Power* carefully built on Crosland's legacy, Blue Labour sought to tear it down.

In Blue Labour's core text – *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox* – Glasman positions Crosland and the revisionism he represents as the root cause of New Labour's problems.⁵⁴ For Glasman, revisionist social democracy shifted Labour's focus away from its role as a movement and its traditions of mutuality, reciprocity and solidarity. Instead, "Labour reconstructed its identity" to focus on the abstract goals of equality and social justice, pursued through expert management of a remote state bureaucracy.

This framing was hugely successful in bringing the argument out into the open. It created a vibrant intellectual climate, as seen in the responses to lead essays from Glasman, Stears and Jonathan Rutherford. It inspired multi-coloured counter-initiatives, like 'Purple Labour'⁵⁵ and 'In the Black Labour'⁵⁶. Blue Labour's core themes of "work, family, place" went on to frame the party's policy review under Jon Cruddas.⁵⁷

However, Blue Labour ultimately failed to gain widespread purchase within the Labour party. In part this was because much of the debate became crowded out by punchy pronouncements on immigration. More broadly, as time went on, Blue Labour's foregrounding of its social conservatism provoked a backlash from the progressive core of the party. Although this was at least in part by design, the arguments it provoked in the end obscured a radical agenda that has the potential to excite and motivate social democrats today.

This can be seen in Glasman's powerful critique of capitalism as "an exploitative and inefficient system of economic organisation", and the inadequacy of "Labour's commitment to the state as the exclusive instrument of economic regulation."⁵⁸ This "uncritical embrace of the market ... led to the greater domination of the City of London, of finance capital, in

the economic life of the nation. Labour did not change the balance of power in the economy”.

Glasman set out an economic reform agenda with democracy at its heart. Here the left’s goal should be to shift the balance of power in the economy, with workers represented on boards, communities capitalised through regional banks, and vocational training strengthened.

This is the kind of economic agenda New Labour was interested in during opposition, as demonstrated by its flirtation with stakeholder capitalism. But it shied away from it in power, instead embracing the City as the golden goose that could fund greater investment in public services and redistribution through tax credits.

The attraction of Blue Labour for social democrats can also be seen in Marc Stears’ radical democratic agenda. In *The Politics of Paradox*, he argued that the Labour party needed to re-establish itself as a movement and become re-embedded in people’s lives. Stears went on to set out how this pluralist conception of democracy could inform wider public service and institutional reform (see *The Relational State and Everyday Democracy* below).

Blue Labour has recently re-emerged, mostly as a debate about how Labour can best stave off the threat of Reform UK and Maurice Glasman’s relationship with JD Vance, again leading it to be discussed almost exclusively through the prism of cultural conservatism.⁵⁹ However, back in the early 2010s, it unlocked a broad seam of thinking, one which can provide some useful foundations on which a communitarian-focused revisionism can build today.

The relational state

The idea of a ‘relational state’ was introduced by IPPR in 2012. It initially appeared in the form of an argument between Geoff Mulgan and Marc Stears, who set out alternative conceptions of the ‘relational state’ across two essays.⁶⁰ For Mulgan, it was about shifting the focus of the existing state architecture – making better relationships a core outcome to which government should aspire, alongside the traditional service improvements of New Public Management’s “delivery state”.

Stears is sceptical about the state’s ability to shift focus in such a way. He draws a distinction between the things states are well placed to do, and those they are not:

“States work best when a problem has a technical, mechanical solution which can be employed everywhere within a shared geographic space. They are at their worst when they need to respond flexibly to local particularities, when they need to act nimbly or with nuance, and – most importantly of all – when they delve into problems of the nation’s spirit or of the human heart. Anything which requires difference, contingency and essential unpredictability is not going to be a skill of the state.”⁶¹

In Stears’ view, guaranteeing fundamental human rights or attempting to reduce NHS waiting times for everyone in the country might well be appropriate objectives for states. Trying to improve people’s mental health, combat loneliness or tackle long-term unemployment probably aren’t.

This debate was brought together into a fuller policy agenda in a later IPPR publication, *Many to Many*.⁶² In it, Rick Muir and Imogen Parker drew on complexity theory to show how the dominant New Public Management approach to public services – targets and markets – was inappropriate for tackling many of the big social problems we face, and how the relational state therefore provided a new organising concept for the left.

The emergence of the relational state went on to trigger a range of aligned interventions. We can find Hilary Cottam’s *Radical Help* agenda (see below) taking shape in response to Mulgan and Stears’ initial essays.⁶³ The Fabians published *Letting Go*, Jon Wilson’s agenda for “how Labour can learn to stop worrying and trust the people”.⁶⁴ There was also a special edition of the *Fabian Review* which outlined “a different vision of a Labour state, [one] more relational rather than managerial”.⁶⁵

Despite this richness of the analysis and ideas, the relational state failed to make the leap from left-of-centre think tank debate to Labour party policy in the run-up to the 2015 election. However, its framing of the questions facing a social democratic state, and location of communitarian answers, remains a powerful strand of thinking.

Everyday democracy

Marc Stears developed relational state thinking to look more broadly at “the possibilities of democracy” for the left.⁶⁶

Stears located this argument in the left’s communitarian tradition. In *Everyday Democracy*, he argues that while more often than not “the attention of the centre-left has been directed to the thorny issue of striking the right balance between state and market”, he notes there have been moments “when the centre-left has turned its attention to democracy”. He

highlights Cole and Tawney, along with campaigns to extend the suffrage, and the 'New Left' intellectuals of the 60s and 70s like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall.

To respond to Britain's contemporary challenges, Stears built on this lineage to develop the concept of an "everyday democracy". Instead of looking to the state to solve problems, he argued, the left should look to the essence of democratic politics: the relationships which bring us together.

Building these relationships, Stears writes, requires four "preconditions": *places* where we can come together; an economy which provides people with the *time* to connect with one another; *organisations* that can sustain our relationships; and crucially the *power* to run our own lives, with democracy spread everywhere, from the workplace to public services.

Stears reflects that while these ideas have a long lineage, "real efforts to build an everyday democracy in Britain have been few and far between". Yet the framework it provides resonates strongly today, suggesting the time has come for the left to put it at the forefront of its thinking.

The foundational economy

During this time, the concept of a "foundational economy" was also developed. This, as described by a 'manifesto' published by the University of Manchester in 2013, is "very large, mostly unglamorous, rather heterogeneous, and is distributed across the country. It is an economy that meets everyday needs by providing taken-for-granted services and goods such as care, telecommunications or food."⁶⁷

So rather than an industrial strategy focused purely on our traditional big-ticket economic development activities - R+D, science and technology, innovation, high-value manufacturing – instead we need to understand there is "not one, but several economies".⁶⁸ The foundational economy spreads far and wide and is connected to everyone's lives. Focusing on it, therefore, could make a dramatic difference to how people experience capitalism, preventing "further deterioration in the composition of employment and [creating] good quality jobs in volume".

The foundational economy spans the private and public sectors and includes: utilities; retail banking; food and petrol retailing; food processing; transport and distribution infrastructure; labour intensive activities in health, education and welfare/social care.

Political interest in this concept later came most prominently from Rachel Reeves, during her time on the backbenches in the Corbyn era. She

rebranded it “the everyday economy” and developed a political economy agenda based around “three constituent parts” of “work and wages, families and households, and the local places people belong to”. In order to successfully develop this vision, she wrote, “Labour must give up its overreliance on state control and become a more social and more democratic party”.⁶⁹

The importance of this “foundational” or “everyday” economy came surging to the fore during the pandemic. For a while, it appeared that we were resetting some perspectives on what we class as “skilled” work and the value we place on care workers, delivery drivers, shop assistants. This reappraisal was all too brief – but the thinking that has been developed can make an important contribution to an emerging communitarian policy agenda for social democrats.

Place-based experimentation

While Westminster focused on the seismic impact of various events – from the rise of Jeremy Corbyn to the ructions of Brexit to the Covid crisis – much of the communitarian energy shifted out of abstract debates and policy development and into practical work in specific places. With national politics increasingly chaotic, we saw a rise in “thinking and doing”, as well as local government and civil society getting on with things independently.

Local government

The **co-operative councils** movement picked up momentum during this time. Building on the pioneering work of Steve Reed’s Lambeth Council, along with Jim McMahon’s Oldham Council and Sharon Taylor’s Stevenage, co-operative councils have sought to model a new form of local government, with community at its heart. They are about shifting away from top-down approaches that seek to do things *to* people, and instead work *with* local people in a spirit of genuine co-operation.

There are now 46 members of the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network,⁷⁰ including celebrated community-powered councils like Wigan⁷¹.

The rise of **community wealth building** has also been a significant development, again led by local government. Building on the idea of the foundational economy, Labour local authorities have sought to take a hands-on role in their own local economies. Community wealth building is most associated with the work of the Democracy Collaborative in the US and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) in the UK. As CLES put it:

“Instead of solely relying on redistributing some growth ‘after the fact’ of its creation, community wealth building seeks to restructure the composition of the economy itself, so that the production of wealth is focused on community benefit by ensuring it is widely held, shared and democratised.”

The work centres on harnessing the power of “anchor institutions”: large, place-based organisations that have a key stake in the local economy, like local authorities, housing associations, universities, NHS trusts and large local businesses.

The ‘Preston model’ has been a poster child for this approach. Back in 2011, Preston found itself economically depressed after the financial crash. Local leaders took matters into their own hands, making a concerted effort to direct the collective spending of their anchor institutions to support local economic development. They shifted local Preston spend from 5 per cent to 18 per cent, with spend in Lancashire increased from 39 per cent to 79 per cent, some £200m.⁷² The results were impressive: in 2018, Preston was named the UK’s most improved city, according to the Good Growth for Cities Index, based on analysis conducted by Demos and Price Waterhouse Cooper.⁷³

While Preston is the most celebrated example, community wealth building initiatives have picked up steam across the country in recent years.⁷⁴ The London Anchor Institutions Network, for example, brings together the capital’s biggest organisations to work collaboratively, awarding £1.75bn worth of contracts with micro, small and medium-sized businesses, supporting thousands of apprenticeships and tackling low pay by adopting the London Living Wage.⁷⁵

Another example is Locality’s **Keep it Local** campaign, which has sought to develop relationships between councils and local community organisations.⁷⁶ The campaign has built a network of like-minded local authorities committed to reversing the trend towards scale and standardisation in service commissioning,⁷⁷ instead seeking to build long-term partnerships with local communities.

Place-based programmes

Alongside the developments emanating from local government, there has been a plethora of truly grassroots place-based programmes and civil society initiatives in recent years. Like their counterparts in local government, they have taken communitarian ideas out of the seminar room to develop a growing body of practical evidence and real life learning.

- Big Local awarded £1m to 150 disadvantaged neighbourhood areas who were lacking in civic assets, with the funding community-controlled and spent over a long-term, 10-15 year time horizon.⁷⁸
- Place-Based Social Action is a £4.5m investment by DCMS and the National Lottery Community Fund, supporting 10 local social action partnerships to address problems identified by the local community.⁷⁹
- Lankelly Chase has worked in five different communities since 2016. Their work is focused on changing local systems to tackle poverty and injustice. Resources are devolved to local people from different backgrounds, who make decisions about how the funding is spent in line with their own collective vision of change.⁸⁰
- Community Economic Development – a two-year programme funded by the then Department for Communities and Local Government to create processes for local residents to shape local growth in their own image and create local jobs.⁸¹
- Empowering Places – a five-year programme designed by Power to Change to explore how locally-rooted community “anchor” organisations, operating in areas of high deprivation, could be supported to catalyse new community businesses and in turn boost local economies.⁸²

Thinking and doing

Over the last few years there has been a rise of thinking and doing, where both ideas development and practical experimentation collide. Two particularly comprehensive visions stand out.

The first is New Local’s ‘**community paradigm**’, which provides an intellectual framework for the burgeoning community power movement in local government.⁸³ It traces a series of public service paradigms: the early ‘civic paradigm’ of patchwork, charitable provision; the post-war democratic collectivist ‘state paradigm’; and the ‘market paradigm’ that emerged in the 1980s. The authors of New Local’s paper on the topic – Adam Lent and Jessica Studdert – make the case that the nature of rising demand means none of these approaches provide the right framework for meeting the challenges public services face today. They explain how “these paradigms trap public services in an approach that is obsessively focused on delivering a response to acute problems in the short-term, rather than focused on addressing the root causes which generate them in the first place.”

Their proposed alternative, the ‘community paradigm’, instead centres around the public sector collaborating with local citizens, with the stated

aim of preventing problems like illness, crime or personal crisis happening, rather than struggling to fix them after the fact.

The second vision is articulated in Hilary Cottam's **Radical Help**: a series of place-based experiments through which Cottam attempts to recast the welfare state from the person up, rather than Whitehall down.⁸⁴ Cottam's work was built around a desire to leave behind "the twentieth-century emphasis on managing needs, on sticking people back together once things go wrong." Instead, modern service systems need to "create capability rather than manage dependence ... To solve today's problems we need collaboration, we need to be part of the change, and we need systems that include all of us".

The five experiments at the centre of Radical Help – deep dives into recasting support for "family life"; "growing up"; "good work"; "good health" and "ageing well" – provide a playbook for social democrats today to develop a new approach. They add weight and evidence to the theoretical work developing the "relational state" earlier in the decade. And we can see lots of examples around the country of this approach taking root, from Greater Manchester's 'Live Well' approach to employment support,⁸⁵ to London's 'My Ends' violence reduction programme.⁸⁶

Crucially, Cottam offers some clues as to how these highly localised experiments might transition into a new system. This is not about "scaling up" things that are working well locally. Scale implies the idea of industrial roll out – but you cannot simply "lift and shift" something from one context into another. Instead, we need to learn to create the conditions for new ways of working to flourish.

The good news is that we already have lots of the necessary infrastructure. There are thousands of community organisations right across the country, working in neighbourhoods, skilled at collaboration, building relationships and developing trust – precisely the qualities a relational state requires. The big challenge is to shift how we conceptualise, organise and manage the state to support a different way of working.

This is of course no small task. But both the community paradigm and Radical Help provide social democrats, the arch organisers of the state, with the intellectual and practical ammunition to do it.

Campaigning for community power

The final aspect of this chapter is an attempt to bring together many of the organisations who have been leading the development of communitarian ideas and practice over recent years. The **We're Right Here** campaign was

founded to help these organisations collaborate and attempt to shift work that has predominantly been happening in the community sector into a wider political space. The campaign has been driven by eight remarkable community leaders.⁸⁷

We're Right Here makes a range of demands to fundamentally reset where power lies in this country. The proposals build on the ideas that have been percolating over the last decade and have been outlined above, with new rights for communities over the local economy, local services and local assets, and new institutions to build long-term power at the neighbourhood level.

One of the campaign's key calls has already made it into Labour's governing agenda. As part of its English devolution bill, the government has committed to implement a 'community right to buy', giving communities the right of first refusal once buildings and spaces with significant community value come up for sale. There is now an opportunity to build on this with two further rights: a 'community right to shape public services', and a 'community right to control investment.'

This could be the first move in a community power revolution to ensure that devolution isn't just about shifting power from Whitehall to sub-regional mayors, but is a transformational journey that travels right into the heart of local neighbourhoods.

A rich tapestry of ideas and practice

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that a strong tide of communitarianism has powered much of the most innovative thinking and richest experimentation over the last 15 years.

There may be a sense that there is little time or capacity to concentrate on ideological revisionism when Labour is rushing to "deliver" for voters in office. But there is a huge repository to draw on; much of the heavy lifting has been done – including both grand-scale conceptualisation of new paradigmatic shifts and hyper-local testing of new approaches and how to put them into practice.

What is still missing is an account of how the various ideas and practices of the last 15 years might provide the basis for a coherent policy agenda for the communitarian left. This is what the final section of this pamphlet attempts to do.

6. THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

The argument of this pamphlet is that the communitarian strand of Fabian thinking can provide social democrats with a powerful roadmap through the huge political challenges of the 2020s. Communitarian thinking has a long Fabian lineage, most notably through the work of GDH Cole and RH Tawney. But up until now it has been in the shadow of the big-state, democratic collectivism associated with the Webbs. The complex nature of our current social, economic and environmental problems means the time has come for Fabian communitarianism to move to the forefront of Labour's approach to governing.

The central insight of this agenda is that equality remains the core concept for social democrats – the “ends” around which the creed should be organised. However, this should not be narrowly understood in terms of income, outcome or opportunity. It is equality of *power* that social democrats should seek – the ability to live our lives together in our communities in the way we choose. Achieving this will require social democrats to understand the state as both a potential ally and a potential enemy.

Indeed, there are two core insights about the role of the state – always the ultimate question for Fabian social democrats – that we can draw from the material reviewed in this essay.

The first comes from GDH Cole – that the state is one “association” among many. It must play an important enabling role, but a centralised bureaucracy can easily overbear and crowd out community. The core task is to design ways for the state to support communities to flourish, rather than taking the lead in providing everything itself.

The second comes from Marc Stears – that states are good at providing standardised solutions at scale, but less useful when nuance and flexibility are required. This requires us to let go of the instinct to fix everything from the centre, and think precisely about where and how the state is best placed to intervene.

It is not the case we need the state to do less. The challenges we face are perhaps greater than they have ever been, so now is not the time for one of

the most powerful tools we have for social change to retreat. But what we need is the state to do things differently – supporting and shaping, inspiring and incubating, rather than directing and delivering, commanding and controlling.

So what would this mean in practice? This pamphlet has outlined a range of communitarian intellectual resources – a century’s worth of Fabian communitarian thinking, the experience of the last Labour government, and the policy and practice development that has happened since. How can these disparate threads come together into a practical policy agenda for the 2020s?

This chapter sets out how a focus on equality of power can shape three broad spheres – the economy, public services, democracy.

A powerful economy

Core communitarian concepts: economic democracy, stakeholder capitalism, foundational economy, community ownership, community economic development, community wealth building.

The lack of power people have in the economy is perhaps the defining story of our age. Whether it’s stubbornly low wages, persistently insecure work or vulnerability to cost of living increases, too often we lack control to change our economic destiny.

In a recent Fabian pamphlet calling for a new ‘Bill of Rights’, Liam Byrne explored how an insecure economy denies individuals the freedom to shape their own lives and pursue their dreams.⁸⁸

As has been explored here, social democrats have failed to adequately respond, essentially taking a laissez-faire view: letting the market rip, and then attempting to use the central state to smooth off its rough edges. Instead, social democrats need to develop a more interventionist approach, acting early to build greater equality of power into our economy.

This power lens is crucial to tackling one of modern capitalism’s greatest ills: regional inequality. That economic inequality is spatial has become accepted as political fact. The previous Conservative government went to great lengths to define it in its levelling up white paper, detailing geographic disparities across the UK and highlighting how they manifest in particular at a hyper-local, neighbourhood level.⁸⁹ However, their ultimate response continued the lineage of successive government schemes that failed to fundamentally shift economic centralisation.

So how might this government finally change the story? It could start by drawing on Blue Labour's economic democracy and the stakeholder capitalism which so interested early New Labour. This means placing equality of power at the heart of how our economy functions, rather than seeking to use the tools of Whitehall to create more equal outcomes after the fact. It would involve looking towards corporate governance reform to bring capital and labour together, shifting power and accountability away from distant corporations and towards workers and communities. There is the potential here for a more ambitious agenda to rewire companies around purpose rather than profit, building in long-term stewardship and environmental sustainability as the driving priority of business.

It would also mean focusing on the foundational economy. Rather than an industrial strategy that solely sets its sights on shiny new infrastructure or big tech and pharmaceutical innovation, Labour could make transformative shifts by affording more attention to improving the jobs that people actually work in. Rachel Reeves has already set out how this approach could shape a policy agenda for the "everyday economy" based around security and prosperity, by focusing on the things that really impact people's lived economic experience. Some of Labour's plans in power are now starting to embed this vision, via the New Deal for Working People and sub-regional devolution. The foundational economy can be a vital part of a transformative economic reform programme.

Democratisation of the private sphere will necessarily involve central state intervention. But a powerful economy must also look local and build participation from the bottom-up. Community ownership is critical to this. We have seen how, often in the face of huge odds, community organisations have taken on ownership of local assets to attempt to shift the direction of their local economies. Indeed, we can see something of GDH Cole's "guild" idea within the modern asset-owning community enterprise – a form of local association, providing the community with a means of controlling economic activity in their neighbourhood. A key task for an enabling state is to make this community ownership journey easier for local people and spread the foundations of community power right across the country. Labour is already starting to do this through a commitment to implement a community right to buy and foregrounding community-owned energy within its local power plan. These could be the starting point for a step change in community ownership that could power-up our local economies.

With growing community capacity, there are other core concepts that can help social democrats build power in the economy locally.

Community economic development is a tried and tested means of bringing people together to make the economy in their area work better for them.

Neighbourhoods can come together to develop community economic development plans, setting out what they want a strong economy to look like, what their strengths are, and how these can be harnessed to create positive change.

Community wealth building can provide a lens to proactively shape a democratised economy at a local authority level. It provides a framework to enable a place to marshal the tools it has at its disposal – including its public anchor institutions, its key local businesses, and its local community – to create a more productive, more equal and more sustainable economy.

Powerful public services

Core communitarian concepts: relational state, radical help, community paradigm, asset-based community development, co-production, 'keep it local'

While a lack of economic power has always been a central concern for social democrats, understanding where power lies in public services has become more pressing over time. The concepts are related – social democracy's attempt to tame capitalism created a central state architecture which has ultimately taken power from individuals in many crucial spheres of life.

We have reached a point where the interests and operation of public service bureaucracies have become wildly detached from the interests of the very people they are ultimately supposed to be serving.

This development is starkly illustrated by an email received by one of the We're Right Here campaign's community leaders. The email was raising the alarm about a woman whose chaotic life seemed to be in danger of spiralling out of control. It was sent to representatives of the myriad agencies that had been involved in her life, detailing her hugely challenging circumstances and the services' failure to manage them. The email then concluded: "My main concern at the moment is death by misadventure and I think it's vital that we as services work together to ensure that *we are all defensible*" (author's italics).

Here we have the state bureaucracy, constructed with the best of intentions, running to its own logic and ultimately worried about its own interests over a woman's life. It's an extreme example, but the end destination of an approach that seeks to "deliver" public services *to* people and do things *for* them, rather than build relationships.

This transactional mindset is deeply embedded; the big state is sticky. But as discussed here, social democrats have a range of conceptual tools and

growing practical evidence to set our public services in a new person-centred direction.

The relational state provides a clear framework. Using this approach, the state remains of vital importance, as it has always been for social democrats. However, our times demand a new conception, one that is focused on the strength of people's relationships, rather than centrally dictated output targets.

The community leader's story above highlights just how difficult the state will find it to make this shift. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the particular skill of the state is to standardise, and people's lives are anything but.

So the state needs to find a new role to play, and a new means of supporting relationships. This means both "letting go" and "powering up".

The state needs to "let go" by working in a much more local way, focusing on creating coordinated systems that break down silos and support people in their neighbourhoods. Currently, our managerial state is still set up to fight the battles of the twentieth century. The challenges of our current times require a much more dynamic, fleet footed, community-centred approach. Getting there will require a huge cultural shift, with power moving out of public service systems and into neighbourhoods.

Simultaneously, the state needs to support local communities to "power up". This means a genuine shift of resources out of the public sector and into communities, enabling local people to set their own priorities rather than only reactively responding to initiatives which are ultimately started and controlled from elsewhere. Community ownership is perhaps the key means of doing this. Transferring assets to local people gives them an independent power base from which they can ultimately become genuine partners with the state, rather than always in a contractual or client relationship.

It is around this partnership between local authorities and organised local communities that the practical construction of a relational state must coalesce. This was recognised by IPPR a decade ago, noting that the local voluntary and community sector was "particularly well suited" to relational approaches:

"They are driven by intrinsic motivation, which helps to build trust; they are rooted in local communities with a deep knowledge and understanding of the area; they tend to have strong existing relationships that can help to make things happen; and they generally have more expertise when it comes to working with people with complex needs."⁹⁰

A range of approaches have been taking root in local authorities which have sought to harness this potential. We've seen "local by default" commissioning of services from councils who have committed to Locality's "Keep it Local" approach. We've seen growing interest in co-production, with services co-designed with people and ultimately co-delivered by them.⁹¹ We've also seen processes developed to embed "asset-based community development", which seeks to shift focus away from people's needs and instead harnesses their strengths, supporting people to solve their own problems by focusing on "what's strong, not what's wrong".⁹²

All this requires a big reset. But the good news is that the heavy lifting has already been done. The missing piece of the puzzle is a clear direction of travel emanating from central government, a realignment of incentives to empowered local communities the norm rather than the exception. This is no small task, but it should be right in the wheelhouse of modern social democrats, those arch organisers of the state, to reimagine it once again.

A powerful democracy

Core communitarian concepts: Participatory democracy, neighbourhood governance, deliberative democracy

It is not a new insight that our formal, representative democracy is in trouble. The most recent British Social Attitudes report found trust in government is at an all-time low. A record 45 per cent say they "almost never" trust governments of any party to "place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party". This is 22 points above the 2020 figure. Another record high – 58 per cent – say they 'almost never' trust politicians of any party in Britain "to tell the truth when they are in a tight corner", up 19 points from 2020.⁹³

However, there are plenty of green shoots to be found when we view politics through a different lens, from the bottom up rather than the top down. Public attitudes research by UCL Policy Lab and More in Common found a huge majority (83 per cent) felt "local residents and community groups have ideas and skills that could improve the local community". More than seven out of ten think "local and national governments do not give residents and community groups the freedom to bring about improvements to their local area".⁹⁴

Similarly, polling by Power to Change found that 75 per cent felt they had "not very much" or no control "at all" over important decisions that affect their neighbourhood and community. Local people were the most trusted to

make decisions, at 40 per cent compared with only 7 per cent trusting national politicians.⁹⁵

Here we can see a different, more hopeful vision of democracy emerging. It's one that closes the gap between decision-making and outcomes on the ground. It's one that's much more present in people's lives, that walks alongside them, that experiences the same things, and works in collaborative relationship. It's a much deeper, more active bond than simply turning up at a polling station every five years – or, increasingly, not bothering. It's a living, breathing local democracy, where there is ongoing participation and dynamic accountability.

A recent report from Locality showed how, in some of the lowest turnout wards in the country, participatory democracy is flourishing.⁹⁶ For example, in Brambles and Thorntree ward in Middlesbrough, only 790 people (13.7 per cent) voted in the last local election. But Community Ventures – a community “anchor” organisation serving 6500 people on the Thorntree estate – regularly engages over 2,000 local people in its activities. As their CEO Mike Milen puts it:

“The only way to change [political disengagement] is to raise people's expectations and give them the confidence to speak out and speak up for themselves. For this reason, we don't simply deliver services – but provide spaces where local people can make decisions about what happens in their communities. Spaces for them to try things, test things, make mistakes, learn and develop.”

Similarly in Hull – home to more of the lowest turnout wards than anywhere else in the country – Lonsdale Community Centre is changing how people view local democracy. While just 13.3 per cent of the electorate voted in the last local elections, the centre engages thousands in its activities and coordinated Hull's first ever neighbourhood plan, which 93.6 per cent of local people voted in favour of.

A central task for social democrats is to incubate this thriving participatory democracy so it can support and stimulate our more formal representative democracy.

Devolution is a crucial first step. Labour has made pushing power out of Westminster central to its vision of a new style of mission-led government, and it was hugely encouraging to see the metro mayors among the first visitors to Keir Starmer's Downing Street. However, further levers at the sub-regional level and greater publicity can't be the end of the journey –

they must be the start of a process of empowerment whose end destination is our local communities.

To this end, we need to strengthen our neighbourhood governance institutions. The community anchor organisations described above are generally building participatory democracy on scraps – we need a greater range of meaningful powers to sit at the neighbourhood level.

We're Right Here is therefore calling for new power-sharing agreements to be established between councils and communities. At present, we lack the structures to make sure the devolved powers the government is promising don't just stay in the hands of metro mayors or town halls, but flow onwards to local communities.

We're Right Here's proposals can do this by providing a flexible mechanism for power to "stick" in a meaningful way at a hyper local level. When it comes to neighbourhood governance, there can be no "one size fits all" solution. So these power-sharing agreements could be formed between local authorities and a range of potential partners, including existing institutions like parish councils and neighbourhood forums, as well as providing pathways for community anchor organisations and new community alliances.

Once established as part of an agreed local power sharing deal, neighbourhoods would then be able to draw down a range of powers from an agreed menu of options. These might be powers over local economic planning, neighbourhood planning, community assets and local services.

Alongside inculcating this participatory local democracy, social democrats should also seek to foreground the growing experiments in deliberative democracy we have seen over the last decade. Deliberative democracy is a means of inserting direct citizen control into policymaking, both nationally and locally. It encompasses citizen's juries, panels and assemblies, where "sortition" is used to ensure balanced representation of a group of people, who then deliberatively engage with evidence to reach informed conclusions.

As the Institute for Government highlights, these methods have been used nationally in countries like France, on climate change, and in Ireland on constitutional questions.⁹⁷ In the UK, they have mostly been used by local authorities, predominantly on climate change.⁹⁸

Labour is right to have made democratic reform a core part of its governing agenda. Its manifesto sets out important plans to reform the House of Lords and extend the franchise to 16-year-olds. This is a hugely important agenda

and is something to be developed further. However, reforms to our representative democracy can only go so far to reconnect people with politics. There is a huge opportunity to re-energise democracy by bringing power closer to home, and making it something people can express in direct and meaningful ways on an everyday basis.

CONCLUSION

The time has come for social democrats to revise their creed once again. The goal is, as ever, equality – but the broad-based equality of power and dignity, not the narrow equality of income and wealth. And in an age of highly complex and overlapping public problems and pervasive mistrust of government, the only way to reach that goal is for the central state to let go and empower local people, communities and authorities.

There may be an instinct to dismiss the communitarian agenda set out here either as being too radical, or, on the contrary, too marginal to the reality of daily political warfare. Politics as seen from No.10 is urgent and brutal. There is no time, it might be said, for big ideas – just ruthless prioritisation, crisis management and the art of dividing lines.

That would be to neglect two important factors. The first is that leaving a lasting legacy as a government requires a big idea, a ‘red thread’ that runs through the programme. Even New Labour, despite staying in power longer than any other Labour government in UK history, struggled to leave lasting change beyond the minimum wage and the foothills of devolution. So much else about the programme was easily reversed by the Conservatives. The current government has the beginnings of a big idea – to be ‘in service of working people’. There is not very much distance to travel between this and what is set out here. But it requires recognising that serving working people means genuinely respecting the contribution they make – to the economy, to their places, to our collective life. And that means empowering them.

The second is that this programme does in fact provide answers to the most urgent, day-to-day questions in the government’s in-tray. Look at any of the government’s six “milestone” pledges, and a communitarian approach asserts itself as the clear route to reaching them. Raising living standards everywhere requires taking the everyday economy, and the potential residing in every community, much more seriously than it is currently. Building 1.5m homes will require a much more empowering planning system that genuinely includes people in proposals for developing their areas – otherwise projects will run aground against local protest, formal or otherwise. Hospital backlogs will only be cleared when the potential for community care is fully exploited. And so on.

Labour must buck a worrying trend of recent years: centre and centre-left politicians around the world have won elections by talking the language of

respecting working people, and by promising to give people more grip and control over their lives, only to cleave to a more conventional state-led model once in power. Biden in the US, Albanese in Australia and Scholz in Germany all trod this path. And all have now been thrown out of office, except Albanese – who may not have to wait long.

This pamphlet sets out the philosophy and approach that a social democratic government in this period of history should adopt if it wants to be both electorally successful and capable of reshaping a country in its image. It is in fact a Fabian approach – just with a little revision.

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