

Labour has been in decline. But renewal is underway. And the GLC is very much part of it.

RENAISSANCE Labour Style

Ken Livingstone

One of the highlights of *Marxism Today's* Left Alive in November was the discussion between Ken Livingstone and Beatrix Campbell on 'Labour and the People'. The GLC has been one of the most interesting and innovative experiments from the Left in recent years. But what are its strengths and weaknesses? Does it offer a model for renewal of the wider labour movement? Here we publish edited extracts from their contributions at Left Alive.

I DON'T THINK that there are as many lessons to be drawn from the GLC as some people are claiming. A lot has happened there, but in terms of the transformation of the GLC into a popular body, we can't underestimate the fact that more than any other institution the Left has ever got its hands on, the GLC is a mechanism for the redistribution of wealth on a grand scale. A third of everything that we do is paid for by the large offices of central London, which gives me a warm glow every night as I go to sleep. That has put us in a position where we can do much more than any borough council in London can do or Sheffield or Liverpool. There is a scale of wealth denied any other local authority and a scale of staffing expertise which has made it possible to mount the campaign we have. Given the policies we've been following are basically popular, then providing you've got sufficient financial strength to get your message across through the existing media structures, you can get the sort of lead in the polls that we've achieved. Policies would have taken a lot longer to get across if we hadn't had access to that finance.

The real danger in this has been that because we've needed to do something within months, at most within a year, we've had to use a whole range of organs of society which are not labour movement organs. We've been buying space in the media that's run by our enemies. And

we've actually circumvented the more long-term building-up of public support that has taken a council like Bologna many postwar decades. So there are a lot of lessons but equally a lot of weaknesses, which haven't yet become apparent and won't do so until some point in the future when we realise that whilst we've become a popular council we haven't built the mass base of support that we should have done.

It's a very shallow level of support in many areas, even though electorally, for example in our GLC by-elections and also spilling over into London borough council elections, we have proved we can win. Indeed, in the same way we've been able to buy the media exposure, that can equally be turned against us by somebody that could spend as much. And in this society most of our enemies can spend as much when they put their mind to it. So we shouldn't get carried away with the idea that all we've got to do is write the lessons of the GLC large.

The Government's weakness

In addition, we've been successful largely because the Government's a lot weaker than many people in our movement perceive. One of the things that depressed me most in the great flurry of interest in Eric Hobsbawm's analysis immediately after the last election was the way that some of the most bankrupt sections in the PLP seized on it because it could provide a justification for their values, rather than looking in detail at what was being said. Now we have got to accept that not only has the Labour Party's position declined dramatically over the last 20 years, but there is also a long-term decline in support for the Tory Party which has been masked by the weakness and debilitation of the labour movement.

We are in a position where this government has been re-elected with 42¹/₂% of the vote. That isn't a mandate for a popular

—Left Alive—
'Labour & the People' Debate

right-wing transformation of Britain. It means that something like 29% of the population went out and voted to put this government back in office. And this government knows it's weak. If it felt strong and secure in the way that the Baldwin administration did in 1935, when they'd been re-elected with 55% of the vote, there wouldn't be the need for the quite massive onslaught that Thatcher and her friends have unleashed against key sections of the labour movement. It wouldn't be absolutely essential to smash those Labour councils which are providing an alternative. The Government is moving against local government both by rate capping and by abolition for the same reason it's moving against the miners. It's the weakness of its support and the very shallow depths of its ideological supremacy. The Government knows the problems that are about to face it, and it knows that it doesn't necessarily have the base to survive. We could very well find that within the next year this government is fighting for survival on a scale which was inconceivable in the aftermath of the general election. That shows itself in the split within the Tory Party.

We've had a lobbying firm of people





A attentive crowd at the debate between Tony

who work day by day in the Commons and the Lords. Not only do they pump out our information and do everything possible to maximise dissent within both houses of Parliament against the Government's abolition plans. But they act as a feedback of information, and in the run up to the Brighton bombing what was coming back was a remarkable sea-change amongst a lot of ordinary backbench Tory MPs and peers who had started to become extremely worried about the direction in which the monetary swing of the Tory Party was taking the country.

Not in the sense that they disagreed with the long-term direction and objective, but they were worried that the speed and the intolerance with which it was being done was preparing a backlash which could endanger the Government. And quite surprisingly a lot of support was starting to materialise around Peter Walker, who is the most archetypal of the wets. That base of support was markedly bigger than that around a figure like Michael Heseltine. So I believe a major split is coming within the Tory Party from a lot of Tories who are terrified that the way the Government has presented its case, carried it forward, and the conflicts with local government and the miners, are now opening the door to a backlash which could bring to power the sort of radicalised Labour government that they fear above all else.

The miscalculations the Government has made on the miners endanger its life. I think the Government seriously did believe that the miners could be beaten in the space of a few months. Now they face the

prospect that we may see a miners' strike going into a second year and that is something that is going to have a major economic impact on Britain, even if nothing else happens. They've yet to discover the exact scale of response there's going to be to rate-capping. Next March and April a whole range of major local authorities and cities could be in industrial upheaval and with a considerable degree of disorder on the streets when the impact of rate-capping hits. If there's still a miners' strike going on at that time, there isn't the scale of resources for policing to be able to cover both those disputes. One of the major factors behind the success of Liverpool Council was the fact that the Government did not want major upheaval and disorder in Liverpool while trying to police the mining communities.

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But the biggest problem faces them across the Atlantic, because now he has been re-elected, Reagan has to do something about the budget deficit. We can anticipate very rapid action in the form of increases in taxes, and major cut-backs in public spending. And that will translate itself into what will probably be the most severe recession we have seen since the Second World War. It will have an impact on every other section of the world economy, but its most acute impact will be here in Britain because monetarist policies have meant a major contraction in our own manufacturing base and a greater depend-

ence of the British economy on oil and on the City of London. But with oil prices likely to fall and less income from financial movements in the world banking system, Britain faces a worse situation than her competitors.

Renewing the Labour Party

What I've just been telling you is not my view, it's not something out of one of those left papers of 15 years ago saying that the great crisis is coming, it's what our financial advisers are telling us at the GLC. And because we owe £2.5 billion pounds we have a lot of financial advisors! That's their optimistic scenario. The pessimistic scenario is that Reagan's grasp of economics is such that they bungle the whole thing and you have a precipitation into something close to the 1929 great crash. That's the scale of potential crisis that is faced. That's why the monetarist wing of the present government realise they need to have a decisive victory over the trade unions and they haven't yet won it; and they need to remove those centres of opposition in the cities which have proved, or begun to prove, so attractive to so many people and a part of the renewal of the Labour Party.

The Labour Party is effectively renewing itself from the grassroots up. Largely a generation that came into politics in the aftermath of 1968 have been getting on to borough councils, county councils, the GLC and actually learning how those sort of things operate, how to use them in the interests of our class and also how to draw lessons out of that. One of the failures of the 1945 Labour Government of which there were many, was the failure of the Left within it. If you go back and read the pamphlets and documents that the Left were writing in 1945-51, there's an incredible naivety about how easy it would be to

carry through change. A real underestimation of the scale of power that would be wielded by the civil service, by financial institutions, America and everyone else. It really was as though for the first time the labour movement found itself genuinely in office in Britain, and made a lot of major mistakes because of that naivety. That won't be the situation in the present period because we've had a generation of people grow up on the Left seeing not just the failures of the 1945 government but also what went wrong in 1964 and 1974 when, unlike 1945, there were virtually no successes to counterbalance the tremendous run of failures that we had. One of the major reasons behind Thatcher's move to try and break this urban base that the Labour Party's developed is that it is one of the most important areas for the development of a Left that understands what it's doing, which is likely at some point to find itself in central government.

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Causes of decline

Now I don't want to skip too lightly over Labour's decline. I think we're all aware of the scale of loss. Given the reasons for it, it was almost inevitable. The Labour Party has been so fundamentally undemocratic for years, authoritarian, unable to listen to people who were outside the top layers of the labour and trade union movement. And it's been a very bad movement at actually taking ideas in from the grass roots, at listening to other people, at listening to the needs of groups that were outside the orthodox labour and trade union movement; it therefore became a very unimaginative and inward-looking small clique. That's been a major problem that we've faced over the last 30 or 40 years within the Labour Party. There wasn't anything happening within it to generate the ideas and activity which would have helped the process of renewal and given it confidence and strength. It just withered away.

The Labour Party is a very centralist party with very centralist traditions. Islington Council, for example, has a radical left reputation and yet its labour relations are such that there has been a long-term industrial dispute. Many of the radical left councils are often locked into disputes with their own trade unions. It often starts because they've made a miscal-

ulation and some faction or grouping seeks to try and exploit that. But then there's an immediate intolerance, the idea that somehow they know best and how can anybody challenge them particularly as they're radical left-wingers. And so there's still a lot to learn and that sort of arrogance is still there even in the parts of the Labour Party currently being renewed by people who've come into politics post-1968.

Those that exercise power have got to accept that that doesn't mean to say they know best, or even that they have a range of information that allows them to make better judgements. And you still see that sort of bureaucratic arrogance reflected in council housing and social service departments. So one of the reasons for our decline is that ordinary people have come along to their council or to a central government department for assistance, when it was run by Labour, and they've been treated with disdain, or arrogance, totally unacceptable attitudes of one kind or another. That has cost the Labour Party a lot of support and it opened the way for the Right to move in and attack bureaucracy as inherently a bad thing, to say it was inherently linked with socialism. They allowed us to develop a very weak flank.

Legacy of Labour governments

The other area very much tied up with our decline is the appallingly poor record of the 1964 and 1974 Labour governments. We know they were all run by social democrats but at least in some other countries the social democrats were able to deliver something: the record of those two governments is mediocre even by social democratic standards. Compare the record of 64/74 against the record of Brandt and Schmidt in Germany, it's appalling. I'm not sure why, possibly it's linked to the very inward looking nature of the leadership of the labour movement in Britain, its elitism and refusal to listen to others outside its immediate ranks. We've also got the major problem that our economic policies, particularly in the 64/74 governments rested on just carving up the growing cake each year. The talk was that there'll be a bit more for everybody and we'll be able to fund all of our programmes without increasing taxation.

The 64/74 Labour governments were elected with very good shopping lists of things to do. But they ended up paying for the services that are needed by the poor and the most dispossessed elements in society by taxing skilled workers. And there isn't the scale of wealth among the skilled workers to justify that. Once again



that has allowed the Right to turn one section of workers against another, the skilled workers against the unskilled. Labour governments can never succeed unless they're prepared to fund their programmes by using the massive financial resources that exist in Britain by controlling the direction of capital.

The ignored sections

Another major problem is that we've had nothing to say in terms of women, black people, lesbians and gay men. For whole sections of society we've occasionally had a policy which has gone some small way, but in retrospect it always looks appallingly poor. I mean we've had an equal pay act which actually made a small difference — women's wages went from 65% average male earnings up to 71-72%. But women's wages have already begun to decline quite severely under this government. We have not just failed to have any policies for women in our society, we haven't actually listened to them, we haven't as a labour movement gone out and said what do we need to do? We haven't looked at how we should change our ways and styles of working so that women can take a full part in terms of policy determination, in terms of holding office, in terms of sharing power.

In its dealings the Left is often as bad as the Right, sometimes a bit worse. We have had nothing to say about women's rights from day one. And while some labour movement speakers now refer to it, we still aren't doing anything about changing the structures of the labour movement so we can transform it, and until we do, we're going to see the majority of women give their support to non-socialist parties at elections because at least those parties operate within a framework of sexism and discrimination which women understand. We pay lip service to doing away with it and yet perpetuate it. Faced with that sort of choice it's not surprising that we haven't been able to win a major increase in support from women.

The same is true in terms of what we've had to say for black people in Britain. In London 15% of the population is black. Their needs are only just beginning to get considered. And the immediate response of the leadership of the labour movement is to say stamp on it, we can't have black sections. What's being asked is that black

people should be allowed to get together free of the influence of white people, discuss the discrimination they feel, decide how to articulate their demands and then come forward to the movement with proposals for change. And we're frightened of it, absolutely terrified of it. And we then drag up a load of black people who've been sufficiently indoctrinated by white standards in our society to argue against it at Labour Party conference.

I've got notes here that I need to mention pensioners, the disabled, lesbians . . . our record is appalling on all of them. We occasionally do something good for pensioners, because we feel a bit sorry about that, but all it means is giving another 50p or a five-pound bonus at Christmas. We've not looked at how we continue to involve pensioners in the control of society. To conclude, I'd just like to say what I believe needs to be done to tackle this. From what I've indicated about the relationship of the labour movement to women, to black people, to the other groups that we need to bring into it, we have to completely recast the way we operate, our structures and the sort of policies we put forward, and to do it, I believe, as we've done it at the GLC. That is one of the strengths of the GLC.

A strength of the GLC

We've actually said to groups outside, tell us what you think. When we came into office we had one black member of the GLC; it was quite wrong to suggest that he should be the voice of black people on the GLC. He has a right to be involved in all the other range of policies and shouldn't be expected to fulfil that role. We therefore established an ethnic minorities unit, we brought in a whole range of people, we set up consultation networks with the black communities in London and that has eventually spread to a whole range of ethnic minorities, not just black ethnic minorities. And they come to us and say what we should do and almost without exception we take that on board and we then carry it out. We didn't go out to the black communities and say we've got a plan for you brothers and sisters, this is going to be wonderful. We said what do you think we can do with the GLC that will assist you? And we've had less success, but still quite a step forward in terms of women, and a quite remarkable success in terms of lesbians and gay men. There'll be some people around who'll say but these aren't groups that are inherently labour movement, and that is really nonsense, that's accepting the registrar-general's definition of class. We're talking about a Marxist

definition of class. Those aren't groups that are outside the labour movement.

I've heard people in the Labour Party say to me you lose votes when you give grants to lesbians and to gay men. And that's undoubtedly true. During the by-election in Paddington, about once every couple of days somebody would say to me 'I've voted Labour all my life but I'm not voting for you because of your grants to these lesbians and queers'. There was not much you could do about it actually. What was interesting was that a day didn't go by in which two or three people didn't come up to me and say 'I've never voted Labour in my life before but as a gay man or as a lesbian what your council has done for us means I'm voting Labour this time'. There are a whole range of groups of people we can reach in society when we start to have something to say for them.

One of the reasons we're so far ahead in the polls in London is that literally hundreds of thousands of people who have never voted Labour in their lives, never had any commitment to public spending in the way that we would have, suddenly saw that our fares policy made sense for them. And people that have been Tory commuters for years think the GLC is something worth saving. If we are serious about transforming society, and we recognise you can't do it on 42% of the vote if you're Thatcher, you certainly won't do it on 42% of the vote if you're a socialist party. You've got to think in terms of winning a majority of society behind your demands. And reaching groups of the community that we've not reached before.

I'm not at all pessimistic about the future. There are terrible dangers in the period immediately ahead but equally there is the chance of actually defeating this government and electing the sort of Labour government that we've waited too long to see. If we can get close to winning the next election, or actually win it, I believe that you will see a completely different PLP, because half will be new people, largely coming from the hard left and the soft left. Its election will give people confidence and the pressures that will build up on that government I believe will move it in the right direction. There's everything to fight for in the coming years and we have the prospect of electing a government we can actually be proud of before the end of this decade but it starts by us saying amongst ourselves we have the confidence and the will to reach out and take power. If we don't exude that confidence and even if we don't believe we can do it, we won't be given the chance.