



An Interview with Ken Livingstone

Resistance to rate-capping has exposed deep flaws in much Labour Left thinking.

It has also accelerated the underlying process of realignment on the Left.

Rate-capping & Realignment

One of the explanations that you've given for the lateness of your intervention in the debate about rate-capping at the GLC was to do with delegation of responsibilities. It's well known that you're a great delegator. But delegation is one thing, abstention is something else, isn't it? Do you think that you actually abstained from a debate that you should have got involved in?

No. The problem for all of us on the upper tier councils was that we were in a minority and a small one, and most of the affected councils were the lower tier ones that didn't have our deadline. The strategy that emerged was most convenient for them and least convenient to the upper tier authorities. I didn't particularly want to say you've got to have a strategy that works best for the GLC, because there's a very strong anti-GLC bias among the other councillors who think they do great work but get ignored and somehow the GLC hogs all the limelight. I also said at every stage when the strategy was evolving that there was a real danger of a spectacular, early GLC failure on this and everyone said, 'well with a majority of four, no-one expects you to be able to carry the policy anyhow'. The damage could have been minimised if we'd just had a straightforward debate and we'd just lost at the end of the day. Once you had all the shock revelations and horror and infighting it magnified massively.

But wasn't that because the terms were set in the way that they were? Couldn't the aggravation have been avoided if there had been a much earlier intervention, not just by you but by others involved and implicated.

Until you reach December, just before Christmas when the Government announced rate-capping figures, everything was speculative. There were lots of articles and speeches speculating about the scale of cuts the Government would demand. I wrote a couple of articles warning that if the Government were really clever they'd go for a very painless introduction in the first year to ensnare everyone and then try and screw you down the following. . .

by
Beatrix Campbell



Isn't that exactly what they've done?

I think that is exactly what they've done. By the time you hit December, those council leaders who had been arguing it's going to be horrendous didn't really feel like turning round and suddenly saying 'oh it's not quite so horrendous, we could get by'. If we'd had any real sort of intelligence, we'd have started out saying we are opposed to the principle of this, and making it clear that it's not necessarily the first year that's going to be bad. But the strategy was always the more horrendous it sounds, the more likelihood you've got of mobilising the troops and having widespread industrial action. . .

Classic ultra leftism, the worse it is the better it is.

I think that's exactly right. It's like those people from California I met in 1966, these student revolutionaries were going to vote for Ronald Reagan as governor because that would precipitate a revolutionary situation. I've always wanted to meet them since!

No serious tactical, strategic or even technical debate at the GLC was

held till the Labour group met in February/March. Hasn't deep discussion been avoided of all the tactical options and implications for different people involved - councillors or trade unionists or consumers.

To a degree yes, though often within a Labour group there's been a lot of discussion. They've discussed it endlessly in some boroughs like Lambeth and Ted Knight's addressed endless mass meetings of workers. People assume if they're rushing around doing all these things that it's actually producing something, and that if you just talk to workers long enough somehow it's going to create a base that you can then mobilise. The GLC, John McDonnell and myself, recommended to an early policy committee that we shouldn't take a position early because we knew that although we could win narrowly in the group there'd be such a substantial minority it would just be broadcasting to the world that there was no chance of winning it, and that would undermine the campaign generally.

But didn't the world know? I mean at least the world of Westminster. They knew you'd got a divided group and probably that you'd had a very smart tactical alliance at County Hall which has maybe created the myth that you've got this revolutionary Labour group.

They knew we virtually couldn't win. What they weren't going to be aware of was the scale of the minority that there would be in the group. And when we took that to the policy committee and then to the group, it was overwhelming that we shouldn't actually discuss it and take a hard position early on. The only dissenting voice on that was Mike Ward.

Why?

Because everyone just felt that if you had actually had to take a firm position early on the group would split apart months before it actually did.

But the group would presumably have split if it was being pushed into a hard position that couldn't have been sustained given the rate limit that was set, or the precepts that were set? There would have been another option which would have kept the group together.

At that stage, namely last summer, everyone could only proceed on the basis that rate-capping was going to be horrendous. Although I said if the Government is really clever, they'll go for a soft option, I also made speeches saying the Government isn't going to all this trouble just to shave a percentage or so off a few councils' spending. They want real cuts. So it was all speculative.

Because it was important to keep the affected councils together strategy generally wasn't discussed more than about 'oh, what's going to happen between now and the next meeting?' No-one sat down and said, incredibly it transpires, well suppose we win? Suppose we get a no-rate position and the money stops coming in, how do we actually organise? Suppose we did? Even worse, there was a desperate determination on the part of the London borough leaders not to have that debate in a wider context. At one of the meetings, Phil Turner of Camden, I think it was, proposed that they should bring together all the affected councillors in London, about 350-400. Ted Knight actually argued very strongly - and I only found this out quite recently - that it would be disastrous because if they all could see where we were going they most likely will want to get out right now. And so there was a quite cynical attempt on the part of some of them to say well we don't want a debate because we know we won't hold it when the crunch comes,

we want to get everyone pushed into a corner, and then they won't be able to get back. And the breathtaking stupidity of that is the assumption that the Labour Party has a range of penalties that can outweigh penalties of the district auditor in the minds of the affected councillors. There ain't none, that's the problem. All the Labour Party can mobilise is that you're all going to be condemned at your party branch and you won't be re-appointed as a candidate. That's hardly got quite the awesome fear that strikes your heart as bankruptcy following you into the grave. Perhaps some people were saying to themselves, well we know the GLC is going to go down first and that gives us the excuse for failing.

My real complaint is that the reason for going for the strategy of all refusing to make a rate at the same time was that we'd all stand together at the crunch. And then in the February meeting of the affected authorities, when they decided *not* to do that, they went for deferral which keeps them out of the courts. The logic of that led people like Derek Hatton to quite honestly agree that Merseyside would actually just set the maximum limit and go for the deficit budget. And people recognised the logic of that. What was wrong was that the people from London like Ted Knight and John McDonnell did not report that the tactic had switched and equally didn't say, the other two upper tier authorities are going for maximum rate and you should do the same. Not only did they not say that, at no point did they report to the party regional executive that our policy doesn't allow for the change of tactic. So at the London Labour Party Conference, virtually all the information that delegates needed to take a decision, to really make accountability work, they hadn't got. Most of the GLC Labour group members probably hadn't got it.

But wasn't everybody implicated? And wasn't there a fetish about illegality, as if going illegal was some kind of virility test?

Yes, which is how it's all seen. But there are other factors, too. One was that a lot of people genuinely believed it was going to be a disaster, the GLC not to have a precept and not to be able to pay wages, and the ILEA schools in chaos. And then there's another group who believe that however bad the law is, you uphold it. I think John and Ted's mistake was simply to perceive that what they were operating with was fear on the part of some councillors and if they just upped the ante, they'd force them to stand firm. That overlooked the strong element of principle in both wings of the party in this debate. It wasn't all the heroic people on one side, and scabs and traitors on the other.

Looking back one of my recurrent themes was to say to people like Kinnock and Cunningham when I met them, you mustn't make legality the issue. If you end up being drawn onto that ground, attention will be drawn away from jobs and services. We actually managed to get Cunningham and Kinnock to barely mention it. They did play it down. Given how they handled the Liverpool crisis the year before, it was a dramatic improvement. But then we stumbled into the problem of making legality the issue and lost sight of the jobs and services. So that the tactic completely supplanted the issue, in the most incredible way, and the tactic is still all everyone is talking about.

Looking at it from a slightly different angle, and forgive me for saying it, but I think you could have redefined the whole debate. Something stopped you. Weren't you holding on to your alliance with the hard Left during that period despite your own better judgement?

Yeah - that's not dishonourable, the GLC has worked because you've brought hard Left, soft Left, Centre and those right



Beatrix Campbell and Ken Livingstone discussing. . . and discussing. . . and discussing. . . and discussing.

wingers that want to do something useful with their lives, together. I mean I'm not looking for a labour movement in which the hard Left is isolated and made pointless and useless and irrelevant, because the Left only advances in Britain where there's a degree of unity. If I was in the Communist Party, whichever wing I was in, I wouldn't drive the other out. I'm the only person I know that tries to persuade both Euros and Tankies to join the Labour Party.

You haven't really answered the question.

Hang on. You say not trust your own judgement. All through last year I was working on the assumption that the miners' strike would run for a bit longer than it did and about sort of October I started making speeches saying if rate-capping starts while the miners' strike is going on, the Government will be in real schtuck because it can't police both the mining communities and the cities. The rate-capping struggle and the miners' struggle running concurrently would have been immeasurably good for both of them. There couldn't have been a worse time for the miners' strike to come to an end, from our viewpoint - exactly when it was about to lift off. And that was a chance of victory worth trying for.

Why was it that when Steve Bundred and Frances Morrell tried to change the terms of the rate-capping debate in their article in the New Socialist last year you didn't participate in that? What they were trying to do was realign, or change the terms of the debate so the sort of questions that you've been asking would have been its agenda. But nobody engaged with it, they were left on their own.

That's really because all my natural suspicions were aroused about what the motives were and where it was leading. I mean, within me are a lot of the old tanky and vanguardist attitudes as well as a lot of the new ones. It's not that I'm a product of just what's happened here recently. I think the reason I often probably annoy people like yourself is basically those conflicting strands which run through my political approach. The real weakness was that the strategy which was effectively binding the whole of the London Labour Party, and having an impact on the national policy, was what emerged from meetings with leaders, and we never really brought together the wider movement, or consulted them even. I think we mistook going and talking *at* trade unionists about having a great struggle for actually *involving* them.

So, the show became about the leaders of the councils either being heroes or creeps, but that meant that all the other participants had very passive roles.

Just walk-on parts. They were there to actually lead the cheers. I think that was a mistake.

Do you think there's sometimes a belief that the people are essentially conservative, frightened, won't want to go the whole way? Success carries a vocabulary of heroism, martyrdom, sacrifice, another virility test?

I think that's a very strong part of the left tradition, because there were times when people did die for the cause. Spain in the 30s, and the struggles on the streets here, the struggles of people in the civil rights movement in the States, right across the Western world. I think what has happened is that the Left hasn't kept pace with the changes in what individuals have in terms of information and power. I mean, in Russia in 1917, with the collapse of the state, uninformed peasantry and a workforce that didn't have access to information, leadership could be decisive and effective. What we haven't fully adjusted to, perhaps because too many of us sit around getting dewy-eyed at the thought of 1917, is that the world is really very different. Most workers have access to information on a scale which was most probably the preserve of the absolute elite in society. They get it through their television, even though it is distorted. The failure of the rate-capping campaign is that for a variety of reasons we regressed.

You feel it's a failure?

Yes. It's a failure to understand the way we should actually treat the Government. We slipped back into the simple position which has been outdated for years, of fine speeches, heroic assaults and overlooked the fact that we didn't mobilise the community, we didn't mobilise the trade unionists, because we never sat down and thought where do we want to be. Now, in terms of what we've done in things like the GLC women's committee, ethnic minorities, gay rights, we've had a quite clear idea of where we wanted to get to. Breaking down attitudes and prejudices and changing lifestyles. At the end of the day nobody sat down and thought what do we want to get out of rate-capping. It remained a purely defensive struggle. We never said rate-capping gives us a chance to completely transform our cities.

Why not?

I think because the basic traditional way in which the Labour Party campaigns is they call meetings and speak to the public and then go on to the next meeting. We do not find a way of involving the community in all the various guises of the community within the structure of the labour movement. We don't involve them in the decision-making process. We talk to them. And if we get the message right, well that's fine. For a while they'll be with you. And if you can then deliver something perhaps they'll stay with you, until it goes wrong. Then what you've built is revealed as just a shell.



The picture that you've described leaves the feeling that the labour movement is a movement that doesn't move.

Yes. The trade union movement, for example, had a very clear relevance to a large proportion of working-class Britain in Victorian times. It's not developed as the party's developed and it's not got more involved in the struggles it could do within the community, around housing, planning, transport, because it is solely geared to wages and conditions. The only time it gets into a wider political perspective is via the Labour Party or Labour government. Once it moves away from the work base it becomes basically a resolutionary body, not a participatory one. And even worse in many areas it has ceased to be a participatory movement even at the point of production.

All this sounds similar to the debate on the Left which, I suppose, these days would be identified with Eric Hobsbawm and 'The Forward March of Labour Halted', a debate about a crisis of participation and representation within the labour movement. Do you feel either interested in or informed by that debate?

The whole of the labour movement's been interested and involved in that. If you actually look at what Tony Benn's been saying for over a decade a lot of it was about democracy. I remember a speech in which he mentioned the Chinese philosopher who said really great leaders were the ones you never remember. But however much we say 'yes, we want to build this participatory party, be a mass movement', at the end of the day all our style of operation in the Labour Party goes into winning control of smaller and smaller caucuses, getting someone elected to a leading position here, there and everywhere. And then waiting for them to deliver. And then when they don't deliver you condemn them, and then the process starts again and you get somebody else in. And you've either got to accept that the whole history of the labour movement leadership is one of consistent and deliberate betrayal; or perhaps we're going wrong somewhere and individuals are always going to be either defeated or broken by events if we don't build a structure around them that allows them to thrive. Given the weak labour movement and the fact that it can't deliver to the masses and it doesn't involve them, people like Benn whilst he was in government, people like me whilst I'm in the GLC, can use the machinery almost as a substitute. That's one of our major weaknesses. We've got a very well-ordered, expensive machine that can make an impact, just as the government ministers have. Once that's gone you're really back into the shell which the labour movement is.

In terms of the debate, it's partly the problem of who your friends are. A lot of the problem with the reactions of the Labour Left to Hobsbawm is the speed with which the most bankrupt elements of the Labour and trade union leadership grabbed on Hobsbawm to justify the last 20 years of failure. Now I'm not including Kinnock in that. And that was damaging. Because as

soon as that lot started smothering Hobsbawm, you pull away. Tony Benn sees a time when you've got to try to change the Labour Party affiliations, open it up. The way I see it, the Labour Party should really be the parliament of the British Left and it should be open to everybody to participate in. They shouldn't have to do it through a very rigid structure.

But why should the rest of the Left have to regard the Labour Party as the centre of its universe? What about the Labour Party engaging in and taking some responsibility for some of the struggles that have been successful over the last few years. How about the possibility of seeing the Labour Party as one institution in the spectrum of the Left. The problem we've all got who are not in it is that the Labour Party takes no responsibility for non-institutional forms of struggle.

But that is the point that I'm trying to make. I mean, at some point there needs to be some sort of umbrella organisation through which the whole of the Left have their links and their relationships and build whatever alliances they can about the particular struggles that affect them at that time. Now I believe that you can have the Labour Party either as one element of that or providing that umbrella role.

But people who are in movements outside the Labour Party could feel it's a very chauvinistic position to start from. You have supported those movements which seek to supersede that chauvinism, and that inevitably puts you in that debate, which represents a realignment on the Left.

You see it as realignment. I see it as widening out and bringing together. Because realignment has a context of exclusion. And a context of a new dominance within that. I just don't think that can work. I mean, the people that are the signatories of the class politics pamphlet, the Tankies in your party and the sort of McDonnellites in mine, if you try and exclude them, they are going to end up taking sufficient body of support away to really weaken the chances of the new alignment you want.

What I'm saying is that we exist in a fascinating historical moment. And you in a sense embody what some of that change means to an awful lot of people. And what's fascinating about it is that there is a new historic settlement within the progressive movement at large. There are different terms for the alliances between the elements that make it up. For women one of the different terms is that we are no longer going to be subordinate. It's not a matter of kicking people around or kicking them out. It's about what alliances are most productive to advance a new historic settlement.

And there can't be a better time now to try and reach those people in the aftermath of what we've learnt from the miners' strike and the aftermath of what we've learnt from the rate-capping struggles.

But why then in that case did you hang on to a kind of personal political allegiance to people, I'm trying to find a way of not being personal about it, to political activists that didn't represent these things?

Because you're in a happy position. You can operate in a party where the struggle is between genuine old Tankies and genuine new Euros. I operate in a party where there is a sort of struggle between our Tankies, our Euros and a very dominant and powerful right wing. And therefore both wings of the Left have to work together.

They haven't done.

Oh they have. They have done quite a lot. And all the gains that we've made have been when those two elements have worked together. On the internal party democracy issues the whole of the Left ended up in the same camp: we all struggled to get Militant in and they came in at the last minute and eventually everyone else was in. On taking over the GLC, the whole of the London Left, for all their suspicions, for all we didn't trust each other, has combined on that. And the only time when anything is achieved within the Labour Party is when all those strands of left opinion are brought together. And now over the last two or three years when those links have been breaking down we've actually seen a position where the Left is much weaker in that sense and the Right has had a very easy time of it.

But hasn't that GLC position partly arisen because out there in the world, the things that produced, whatever it is that people associate with the innovativeness of the GLC come from precisely those insurgent movements, that don't represent an abandonment of the working class, but a recognition that the working class is something different from what people saw. You had that other social face outside, didn't you?

And it was going to happen in London before it happened anywhere else.

Quite.

Because this is where the population changed most dramatically. There are other parts of the country where the signs are still fairly imperceptible of that change. Or it's ended up with the position in, say, South Wales where the people who had they be born and brought up in London would be on the GLC are actually in Plaid Cymru. In other parts of the country they just can't bring themselves to join the Labour Party, I mean they're still in the SWP or something because the Labour Party is so corrupt. But the rate and the pace of change is so different. Given the concentration of the media on London, it's been that obsession with what we're doing and it's had an impact, and it suggests that this is happening right the way through the Labour Party. There's still a lot that's a long way behind. People have often said to me that what they really like about the GLC is that no-one asks them to produce a party card before they could get involved in what we are doing. And a lot of the old Left have very much sniggered behind their hands about a lot of the things we've done. And they're very much the people who've been quite happy now to move forward for the kill.

You make much of your support for feminism, tell us what you feel you've learned from its way of going about things, both personally and politically.

I suppose the most important thing that feminism has been raising is the style of operation, in that it's basically supportive and the focus is on the weak links. The normal pattern of working in the Labour Party is that as soon as you've got a weak link, you smash it and advance your own position at its expense. Whereas if you actually took the time and trouble to bring those people with you, and recognise they've got a contribution, and recognising that the fears that they're expressing are probably the fears of tens of millions of people outside anyhow, you realise that if you can't answer their fears you most probably aren't going to mobilise people. And, therefore, it's a question of whether you go for a

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movement which progressively excludes and eliminates people as you advance until you come down to a small core, whether you look to actually expanding the people in the leadership and bringing more people with you, and so building up what is a genuine mass party.

One of the things that seems dead boring about the way some men go on about feminism is that you feel they're just imbibing this thing without learning that you yourself are a part of, and a participant in change, in other words you're going to be changed as well. Do you feel that you are?

I recognise it's slowly changing me. But it is painfully slow. I was born in 1945, brought up through the 50s and absorbed all my attitudes about women in an all-boys school. It wasn't until I started working in 1962 with women and coming into contact with them that I saw them as anything other than something vaguely sub-human. My generation, and for men slightly older perhaps, is the most difficult generation to change. I recognise it's changing me, but I see it as a painfully slow process and I slip back and revert so easily.

Can you imagine what the Left and the labour movement is going to look like as we reach towards the end of the century? And how far do you think some of those transformations that we've been talking about are going to be built into its politics and its practise?

The potential is there for it all to happen. And the potential is there for none of it to happen. If you have a Labour government that behaves in the way the GLC's done it would massively advance that process. They aren't going to be able to do it in the old traditional way. So the next Labour government, either it's going to be defeated or it's going to have this break. And I think there is a chance of winning that struggle. Certainly it's not a foregone conclusion one way or the other. The way a lot of the parliamentary selections are going is quite interesting because the vanguardist Left is doing very badly. What is derisively called the soft Left, though it might be best to call participatory Left - I think a much better definition of hard and soft is vanguard and participatory - is that section of the Left that's doing quite well. And so there is a real chance that the next PLP will put the issues of race, feminism and sexual politics firmly on the agenda. I think there is everything to fight for. It might just be very little progress by the end of the century, or massive progress.

Do you feel yourself being a bit less sectarian about what you once called soft Left and now identify as something else?

I remember once talking to Frances Morrell about a Labour Co-ordinating Committee meeting, it was a very nice atmosphere and so on, no one had condemned me, and she said, 'well that's the nice thing about the LCC, they're always defending last year's gains'. And so there are real weaknesses in the soft Left, but at the same time a lot of what we've been able to achieve in County Hall has been because of the more radical imagination of that group, what I call the participatory wing of the party. The labour movement is not going to achieve anything without the coalition and agreement of all the various trends within the party together. Otherwise it will just be a straightforward re-run of 1964 and 1974. If we are going to survive, what I've said frequently - and this has often caused some of my vanguardist friends to look ill or suggest I should go to a mental home - is that we cannot achieve socialism other than via feminism.

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