

# STILL PARTYING LIKE IT'S 1995

HOW THE CENTRE-LEFT CAN GRASP THE  
NEW SOURCES OF ENERGY IN SOCIETY  
TO TRANSFORM POLITICS

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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POSITIVE IDEAS  
for CHANGE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two decades ago, New Labour captured the optimism of the post-cold war era and used it to build a project of national modernisation with majoritarian appeal. It dominated British politics for well over a decade and its insights and orientation continue to define political debate. However, as this report shows, its foundations have been undermined by events and overtaken by new economic, social and cultural forces. These are generating new sources of energy and new political resources in which a centre-left project for the current era can be built. The context for British politics is significantly shaped by international forces, not least the unfolding crisis in the eurozone, but this report focuses on domestic issues.

At root, this report tries to make sense of a political moment that often feels impossible to understand. The financial crisis and its aftermath have dramatically shaken the expectation of rising prosperity. Riots on the streets leave a profound sense of social unease, only compounded by our inability to account for their eruption. A series of powerful elites have shattered bonds of trust at home, while Britain's purchase on international events seems increasingly unclear. In response to such convulsions, politics should help society talk to itself and chart a new course, knitting together personal concerns into a shared national project. But at this time of need, politics is tending to feel strangely impotent and detached, struggling to provide either answers to problems or avenues for expression.

In reaction to this volatility, the main political parties are struggling to define their identity and purpose. Negotiating Coalition government makes this more complicated for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, while Labour continues to wrestle with the legacy and lessons from its period in office. The way these dilemmas play out will rest on the course of events and the actions of leaders and citizens alike. But they will, in turn, be framed by the deeper, underlying context in which politics is now taking place. The purpose of this report is to identify and analyse those conditions, referred to here as the 'political sociology' of contemporary Britain, to shed some light on the sources of energy shaping politics and where they might be headed.

### Transformative politics and the challenges facing the centre-left

Interrogating the economic, social and cultural trends shaping politics highlights the context and tasks which any party or movement must confront if it is to be relevant and mainstream. As Chapter 1 sets out, the argument in this report is that *transformational* political projects are those that harness those 'sources of energy' in society to make strategic ideological and electoral advances, with popular and institutional roots that have the potential to endure. The Attlee and Thatcher governments stand out as meeting these demanding criteria, pursuing a patriotic politics, framed around the national interest, and in tune with the spirit of their times.

Understanding political sociology can help address the profound challenges facing the centre-left in Britain – and shared across much of Europe. As Chapter 2 describes, Labour received just 29 per cent of the vote in 2010, questioning its status as a truly national party. The centre-left lacks fiscal credibility after its political economy was exposed by the financial crisis. Pursuing social justice with less money around and less reliance on the central state requires a new statecraft. And it suffers from a 'tin ear' to expressions of cultural sentiment, from a yearning for recognition to a desire for more than just the bottom line. This report argues that the left must be more honest about the scale of its challenges, but also more ambitious about its goal: to not only win elections, but transform politics.

To anchor a comparison, Chapter 3 analyses the synthesis of sociology and politics that underpinned the emergence of New Labour in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Labelled here the ‘modernisation era’, this draws together the dominant sociological trends, theoretical concepts, political imperatives and electoral strategies of that time. It shows that New Labour was a serious attempt to engage with the country Britain was becoming in the 1990s and to shape a majoritarian political project in response to those conditions. However, while the world has moved on since then, many of the default assumptions underpinning political debate have not. In important respects, the political class is ‘still partying like it’s 1995’.

### Political sociology and the new sources of energy in British politics

A centre-left project capable of securing strategic advances must be founded on an understanding of the new political sociology of Britain. It must respond to its realities, harness its energies and grasp its opportunities. To frame such a project, Chapter 4 analyses the decisive events and sociological shifts underpinning contemporary politics – and their implications for the centre-left. The table below provides a summary of those central shifts and their implications.

| Core aspects of the new political sociology   | Core ideological tasks and electoral landscape   |
|---|--|
| <p>1. The <b>labour market is ‘polarising’</b> with growth in professional/managerial occupations as well as in lower level service sector employment, alongside a ‘hollowing out’ of mid-skill manual and administrative jobs.</p>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pursue full employment, through exports and domestic demand, based on high value added.</li> <li>• Unite professional and managerial employees, private sector, service workers, and the self-employed and temporary staff.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>2. The <b>living standards of working people are stagnating</b> as the share of national wealth going to low and middle earners declines and average wages flatten, having failed to keep pace with rising productivity or prices.</p>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate fiscal responsibility to protect national and personal finances. Raise the wages and job quality of working people.</li> <li>• Respond to the need for greater economic security, in ways that build alliances between those on low and middle incomes.</li> </ul>                                  |
| <p>3. A <b>divide is emerging around the age at which women partner and parent</b>, against the backdrop of a continuing rise in non-traditional family forms and a plateau in rates of female employment.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise childcare and social care to advance equality, raise the employment rate and broaden the tax base.</li> <li>• Forge alliances between diverse family types – and women and men – around shared concerns about work and care.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>4. The <b>expansion of higher education</b> is raising the qualifications of those entering the labour market and increasing the proportion of graduates in society. But there remains a core without qualifications, including many low-skilled (male) youth.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure good quality routes from education to work for all young people and raise the demand for – as well as supply of – workforce skills.</li> <li>• Recognise that the graduate share of the electorate is rising <i>and</i> that a clear majority still do not hold a degree level qualification.</li> </ul> |
| <p>5. The <b>higher flow of migrants</b> coming to visit or settle in Britain, and numbers leaving to go abroad is contributing to greater ethnic and cultural diversity and a more fluid population.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish controlled but not closed borders, maintain the privileges of British citizenship and respond to the impacts of local population change.</li> <li>• Recognise the economic insecurity and cultural anxiety underpinning hostility to immigration.</li> </ul>  |

| Core aspects of the new political sociology   | Core ideological tasks and electoral landscape  |
|---|---|
| <p>6. <b>Older people are the fastest growing demographic group</b>, divided between ‘affluent actives’ and those less independent. The number of under-25s is set to decline, though offset by recent rises in the birth rate.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meet the rising pressures, but also harness the opportunities of ageing, while catering for the diverse lives of older people.</li> <li>• A third of the electorate will be over 55 by 2017, though this is an increasingly diverse group of voters.</li> </ul>          |
| <p>7. The <b>rise in home ownership has slowed</b>, including a big decline among under-30s. The numbers privately renting have grown, while levels of social renting have stabilised.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Build more homes and improve the quality and security of rented accommodation.</li> <li>• Seven in ten are home owners, but there are a million more private renters since the year 2000.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>8. <b>Mental illness and chronic conditions are increasingly</b> the main drivers of poor health and disability, while ‘lifestyle’ related problems have risen significantly.</p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enable disabled people to live independently, while understanding the rise in mental health and lifestyle-related conditions.</li> <li>• Recognise those with a disability or long-term chronic condition as a significant set of voters.</li> </ul>                     |
| <p>9. <b>Voting behaviour is becoming more volatile as loyalty to political parties declines.</b> However, other forms of civic and political participation are holding up, though finding new avenues of expression.</p>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tap into sources of energy outside formal democracy, without seeking to control them or allowing sectional interests to dominate.</li> <li>• Adapt to volatile voting behaviour and declining party loyalty (meaning more ‘swing’ voters).</li> </ul>                    |
| <p>10. The <b>rapid spread of the internet, digital technology and social media</b> is providing new avenues for political engagement and expression.</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use new technology to hold power to account and help people build relationships.</li> <li>• Learn how to communicate in a more competitive and less trustful landscape.</li> </ul>   |
| <p>11. Society has become <b>more tolerant and socially liberal</b>, alongside <b>resilience in aspects of culturally conservative sentiment</b>, like the importance of recognition and roots.</p>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defend personal freedoms and non-discrimination, while responding to the desire for security and belonging.</li> <li>• Mobilise cultural sentiment, such as around responsibility, family, tradition and patriotism, that can nourish a centre-left politics.</li> </ul> |

### The foundations for a new centre-left politics

The political movement which captures the opportunities of this new era will show *leadership*, in interpreting the current moment and the response it requires, and *action*, in mobilising ideas and interests, agency and alliances, to advance and entrench its goals. Chapter 5 explores how the centre-left might pursue such a project, reaching beyond ‘policy’ or ‘delivery’ to the broad forces in society which could form part of a political alliance, and how it might engage with opposing ideological, institutional and electoral forces. It argues that a centre-left project which aspires to be transformational should focus on four interconnected fronts:

#### 1. Reform British capitalism, in the name of a more productive, innovative economy

Ensuring good jobs and higher living standards requires a coalition to reform capitalism in the service of a more productive and innovative economy, where working people ‘share in the proceeds of growth’. Reforming capitalism is necessary to exploit the creativity and wealth that can be generated by competitive markets and productive capital, while limiting the tendency of capitalism to concentrate power, become inefficient and lurch between instability and crisis. British capitalism is currently failing on its own terms, but reforming it

will not only require new policies, but a coalition of interests, institutions, alliances and agency.

New institutional stakes in the ground are needed that set the economy on a more productive and innovative course. Rather than micro-meddling, this means new ‘rules of the game’ that alter the terms of engagement for individuals and firms, in the national interests. Given the fiscal constraints, a strategy of economic *reform* is essential if the reality of fiscal constraint is not to leave major economic and social problems in its wake. A coalition for reform needs not only a band of supporters, but an alliance of forces across society that can advance the agenda. This should include:

- firms with a commitment to quality products and services and a highly skilled and well managed workforce
- strong business leaders promoting the needs of British industry, beyond the financial sector (especially in the cities and regions outside London)
- local institutions that forge alliances between businesses, with roots in particular places, to advance investment, growth and employment
- investors seeking longer-term returns, like pension funds and ‘patient capital’
- modern trade unions and other trade or professional associations committed to promoting good work and challenging bad work
- credit unions, building societies, mutuals, social enterprises and other aspects of the ‘social economy’
- philanthropists, ethical consumers and other individuals committed to reforming British capitalism.

This coalition must be framed around the conditions for British prosperity in the ultra-competitive 21st century economy. Those standing *outside* the coalition would include those who add no productive value to the economy; firms devoted to short-term profit maximisation at the exclusion of all else; sectional or vested interests who want special treatment or an unfair advantage; power hoarders in the public, private or social sectors; and those not meeting their responsibilities to society or free-riding on the efforts of others.

## **2. Recast the public sphere, through reform with roots not just higher spending**

A transformational centre-left project should aim to recast the public sphere to secure those vital goods and protections that the private market and the majority of individuals cannot secure alone. This means responding to core economic risks and social needs – like housing, unemployment, pensions and care – alongside public services like schools and hospitals. The public sphere should advance national priorities, be majoritarian in scope and distinct from both the size of the state and the level of public spending. Drawing together what is currently defined as the welfare state, public services and local government, the public sphere should aim to entrench structural reforms with institutional roots. This is what is most likely to be transformational and resilient, whereas particular instances of public spending (or rates of taxation) tend to be ameliorative and transitory.

The centre-left needs a new statecraft and model of change which pursues core economic and social goals, arising from the new political sociology. This should focus on the strength of the public sphere, not an abstract debate between state and market provision. In other words, it should:

- meet core economic risks and social needs, which improve the quality of people's lives and advance national priorities
- make strategic choices about which services and protections to prioritise, rather than trying to affect everything a little
- aim to change the 'rules of the game', through institutions and system reforms, not least to encourage diversity and innovation in provision, rather than standardisation
- face up to tough choices on public expenditure (and new funding options) to enable new or improved services or protections, rather than just defending the status quo
- be majoritarian, not marginal, in seeking to build shared interests between potentially divided groups, not make micro-offers to particular groups
- forge partnerships with people and give them real power over their lives, rather than doing things for them or to them (including expecting citizens to meet their responsibilities)
- devolve democratic power to the nations, regions, cities and rural areas of Britain, rather than hoarding it at the centre
- recognise the value of human relationships and remember that meaningful change only occurs when people play a part in bringing it about themselves.

Such a recast public sphere would, for example, place a new priority on childcare and social care, where needs cannot be met by the private market or the majority of individuals alone. This would support family life, boost the employment rate and broaden the tax base, while advancing equality. It would build alliances across different family types and between generations. However, this would not necessarily mean state-run or centrally administered service. Though it would require structural reform and strategic priorities in public spending, as well as enhancing universal *services* at the cost of some universal *benefits*.

More broadly, a recast public sphere that enhanced income security for people losing their jobs could forge an alliance between those on low and middle incomes, while underpinning a strategy for full employment. A majoritarian public sphere would aim to pursue decent, affordable housing, reaching across tenures, harnessing state and market. It would stand for decent workplace pensions, rather than either defending a sectional interest or pursuing a divisive agenda. And it would redistribute power, including to strong local government and local political leaders, to give people more avenues to build alliances and overcome conflicts of interest in the places they live.

### **3. Harness cultural sentiment, by recapturing what is 'left' on the 'right'**

The centre-left should reach into those sentiments captured by the right, but which express its own best instincts and can add strength to its project. That means tapping into both liberal *and* conservative instincts, where they express centre-left values. This can help reach into new ideological and electoral territory, currently owned by the right, broadening the political resources at its disposal. Defending personal freedoms and protection from discrimination can be done alongside greater attentiveness to certain conservative expressions of culture and identity, which would nourish a centre-left politics.

Recapturing what is 'left' on the 'right' means balancing rights and redistribution with a concern for recognition and roots. Conservatism can be authoritarian and oppressive, just as liberalism can be atavistic and transactional. However, there are aspects of conservative sentiment that have long been defined by the right but which contain sources of political energy for the centre-left:

- People taking responsibility for their actions, fulfilling their obligations to each other and treating others with civility and respect
- Protecting cherished institutions and stable relationships that reach beyond market and state, whether in the family, civil society or nation
- Preserving things of value as well as making progress to something new, tradition as well as modernity, stability as well as change
- Patriotic pride, a sense of national identity and the desire to be part of something bigger than oneself
- The importance of our natural landscape and rural communities
- Common sense, self-restraint, delayed gratification and hard work
- Forging common attachments and shared identities, as well as ensuring space for personal autonomy and individuality
- Valuing family ties, putting down roots and making enduring commitments to particular people, places and institutions.

Such sentiments – when expressed with compassion and solidarity – are compatible with any definition of socialism or social democracy. Embracing the conservative aspects of its political tradition – without sacrificing liberal freedoms and protections – can help the centre-left advance its goals. It would allow issues like crime, defence, the family, welfare and immigration to be contested with much greater intellectual confidence and political authenticity. The alternative course would be to ignore or sneer at such sentiment. But respecting the things people care about and choose to value does not mean abandoning the contest for their political expression.

This approach also highlights the limits of a bureaucratic and managerial statecraft, insensitive to particular traditions and circumstances. It widens governing strategies beyond just the state and spending, to engage citizens, associations and institutions as partners in its project. It guards against an elitist politics that entrenches the gulf between the political class and ordinary people. It revives the notion of political parties as vehicles for changing society, not only controlling the state. It reaches into the right's electoral strongholds and helps to forge alliances between groups of voters thought to be irrevocably divided. And it focuses on the importance of articulating a national purpose that connects to popular sentiment and everyday experience.

#### **4. Pursue a plural majoritarianism, to build electoral alliances and advance goals**

Finally, the centre-left must craft a plural majority out of the new political sociology of Britain. This does not mean searching for the latest 'Mondeo man' or 'Worcester woman', less still trying to make enough micro-offers to enough sectional interests to get over the winning line (which undermines governing coherence). Instead the goal is a majoritarianism which speaks to the national interest and seeks to build alliances across the country; not only to secure votes, but to build partnerships to advance a shared political project.

Any plausible centre-left majority project must, self-evidently, reach across working-class and middle-class voters, remembering that these groups are neither wholly distinct nor internally coherent. It must focus on 'swing voters' – as their votes are up for grabs – but recognise that these are not all middle class. And it must appeal to 'working-class' voters – as they have not disappeared and are no longer automatically loyal – but remember that they do not necessarily want a more traditionally liberal or left-wing politics. An alliance of working- and middle-class Britain could be built around their areas of shared

interest: higher living standards; a strong public sphere; and recognition of both liberal and conservative values. More importantly, a plural majoritarianism should:

- encompass the expanding professional and managerial class; the ‘new working class’ (increasingly female, part-time and found in the private, service sector); and an alliance of the self-employed, small business people and entrepreneurs
- reach deep into the groups that now dominate the electorate: over-50s; private sector, service workers; and homeowners – as well as both men and women
- capture the new electoral territory: the rising generation of ‘active affluent’ older people; the growing ranks of ethnic minority and new migrant voters; the expanding group of private sector renters; and the increasing number of people living with a long-term condition or disability
- aim to forge alliances between liberal and conservative sentiment, around shared centre-left values and sentiment (for example, the rising ‘green’ constituency of voters and interests might span this divide)
- recognise the distinct nature of English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish politics and its electorate in the post-devolution era, as well as the geographic dimension to British politics: north and south; urban, suburban and rural
- expand the electorate by seeking to mobilise the votes and agency of those alienated from politics, especially young people and those from lower social classes.

A genuinely *plural* majoritarianism would assemble a broad front of political forces, while being more comfortable with a volatile and dissenting political culture. Such an alliance should include social media and online campaigns, but also the panoply of trade unions, civil society groups and local democratic institutions which constitute the ‘other democracy’ outside formal parliamentary politics. The risk for the centre-left is in speaking to sectional interests, being attached to declining demographic groups, and left playing patchwork politics. Across Europe, the centre-left is in danger of being identified with minority electoral enclaves: the public sector, a cosmopolitan elite, ethnic minorities and immigrants, manufacturing workers and those in receipt of state benefits.

### **Conclusion – a moment of juncture and new possibilities**

The course of history will not be determined by political sociology, but it does establish the context for the contest. Twenty years ago a confident era of modernity defined the spirit of the age, following the end of the cold war and the triumphalism of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. The mood today is altogether more anxious, insecure and distrustful. All political parties are struggling to come to terms with the volatility of economic, social and cultural circumstances, of which panic on the trading floors and riots on the streets are just the most obvious manifestations.

There are moments in politics when the future is up for grabs – and the party or movement able to make sense of what is happening has the chance to shape the course of events. Both the Attlee and Thatcher governments did this, harnessing political junctures to make lasting changes in their image. It is not yet clear whether we are in the midst of such a juncture, but there is undoubtedly uncertainty in our political life, generating new energies whose expression is not yet determined.

This provides new opportunities for the centre-left: to not only win elections but transform politics. To do so it must understand the new political sociology of Britain to advance an ideological agenda and redraw the electoral map. This paper tries to show how it could go about constructing such a transformational political project.

# 1. THE CONDITIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS

Writing 20 years ago, in the last edition of the iconoclastic journal *Marxism Today*, Geoff Mulgan argued that politics was an endless search for energy. Successful political movements, he claimed, are those that tap into the most powerful sources of energy. These can be found in either the strength of its own ideas and traditions or the shifting sociology of contemporary society.

Mulgan described the latter as: ‘powerful (if exhaustible) energies that come from the dynamic currents of a society: perhaps the confidence of a rising class or a demographic bulge. These are the political equivalents of fossil fuels, forced to the surface by seismic shifts in social structure, and available to anyone with the wit to use them’ (Mulgan 1991). The task for each generation of politicians is to tap into the ‘renewable strength’ of ideas and to ‘harness the strongest new energies’ in society to advance their goals.

Political debate, especially on the centre-left, tends to focus on the former of these tasks; through the exploration of values and policy. The purpose of this paper is to show that, to be empirically rich and politically productive, these vital debates must be rooted in the latter. Working out ends or means cannot be done in the abstract. Both must be grounded in the economic, social and cultural forces shaping British society and its electorate. Described here as ‘political sociology’, this is an understanding of the deeper, underlying trends driving the context for politics – distinct from political marketing or voter preference satisfaction.

In that spirit, this paper sheds light on the ‘new energies’ in British politics today: how they are different from 20 years ago; where they might be headed in the future; and whether they provide sources of momentum (or constraint) for the centre-left. The aim is to help the centre-left confront the scale of the challenges it faces and be more ambitious about its purpose. That purpose should be to not only win power but to master the moment so as to transform politics. Transformative political leaders and movements are those that understand the sources of political energy in society and harness them to advance their ideological project and put down enduring roots of popular and institutional support. The last 60 years have provided two such transformative examples – the Attlee and Thatcher governments.

## 1.1 Attlee and Thatcher: winning elections and transforming politics

In the 1940s, Britain’s economy was on its knees following the second world war. Its people demanded greater protection and better opportunities for each other following their huge sacrifices. The Attlee government’s programme of nationalising industry and expanding the welfare state met the needs of that moment and the spirit of that time (Morgan 1985). Crucially, these steps also represented a major advance for social democracy, with institutions that lasted, and put down new roots of popular support in the country. Millions of people gained an enduring stake in the new settlement, through jobs, homes and services. This strengthened Labour’s support among the working class, which constituted the vast majority of the population at that time.

However Labour’s message and agenda in 1945 was explicitly majoritarian, framed by patriotism and the national interest (Pugh 2010). It was neither ideologically nor electorally sectional; reaching out into parts of the electorate that Labour had been unable to attract in the 1920s and 1930s. While political failures and economic troubles led to electoral defeat within six years, the basic settlement forged in the aftermath of the second world war dominated British politics for the next three decades – and ensured Labour’s place as a truly national party.

By the end of the 1970s, Britain's economy was stagnating and uncompetitive, while society was breaking free from deference in search of personal autonomy and material affluence. It was also a time of social anxiety, with the backdrop of the cold war, poor race relations and the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It was the Thatcher government which understood and grasped the moment. Reforms such as privatisation and council house sales, along with a strengthened 'law and order' state, were seen to meet the needs and aspirations of the age. They also advanced a new ideological agenda, while enabling the Conservative party to reach into new electoral territory and entrench its support among rising sections of society (Gamble 1994).

Going with the grain of economic and social change, Thatcher broke the labour movement's industrial base and split the working class (already declining due to industrial restructuring). She forged a powerful alliance of those attracted by the prospects of ownership and advancement plus the expanding professional and managerial classes (and attached them more traditional Tory support). This not only built a vote-winning coalition, but also sunk deep electoral and institutional roots, while adding popular ballast to the ideological project. In addition, Thatcherism's language of national revival – speaking to both the aspirations and anxiety of the age – underpinned both its majoritarian appeal and intellectual dominance.

Diametrically opposed in many ways, the Attlee and the Thatcher administrations shared a methodology for success. They addressed their programme for government to the condition of the country and the character of the electorate at the time. They attached their political project to the sources of energy in society at the time, going with the grain of sociological change. They harnessed those rising forces to advance their ideological agenda and entrench popular and institutional support that long outlasted them. Finally, they constructed patriotic and majoritarian electoral appeals, framed around the national interest, which captured the spirit of times and transformed the terms of politics. In Brian Harrison's phrase, they both generated their own enduring 'consensus' (Harrison 1999).

It is arguably too early to assess the legacy of the last Labour government against these criteria. It is certainly true that Tony Blair grasped the wave of optimism and affluence in the 1990s and turned it in support of a project of national modernisation with – for a significant period – broad popular appeal. Whether it was transformative – in setting a distinctive new ideological path or putting down popular or institutional roots – is more questionable. The impact of fiscal austerity will certainly cut away some of its immediate legacy. In some ways New Labour was more a reaction to what it was not – neither the New Right nor the Old Left – than a positive prospectus. Only history will be able to offer a balanced and rounded judgment.

## 1.2 Beyond 'market research socialism' and 'no compromise with the electorate'

One of the immediate legacies of the New Labour era is scepticism, bordering on cynicism, about the very idea of engaging with political sociology. The task of understanding the electorate has become associated with political marketing and voter targeting, embodied in the tyranny of focus groups and opinion polls. Similarly, efforts to identify sources of momentum in society – or to 'go with the grain' of change – are portrayed as a cover for determining direction and closing off options. Both accusations have some grounding in reality. But a course can be navigated between simply following public opinion on the one hand and ignoring what people think and want on the other.

Similarly, current circumstances can be seen as neither immutable nor irrelevant in the pursuit of political goals.

In exploring political sociology there are two dangers to be avoided. The first is ‘market research socialism’ – the attempt to fit a political agenda around what voters (are thought to) want or to slavishly seek to satisfy the preferences of the mythical ‘median voter’. The second is ‘no compromise with the electorate’ – the elitist belief that politicians know better what voters think, or what is good for them, than they do themselves. Both these approaches are incompatible with an emancipatory and transformative political project, where real change occurs when people play an active part in solving their problems and governing their lives (Alinsky 1989).

This perspective emphasises the agency of ideas, organisation and leadership in politics. Nothing in this paper suggests that economic, social and cultural forces cannot be – and are not – shaped by both politicians and ordinary people alike. And it confirms the importance of delving beneath the simplistic caricatures of British society and its electorate that predominate in our political discourse. The task of understanding the political sociology of contemporary Britain is far more profound than identifying the latest ‘Mondeo man’ or ‘Worcester woman’.

### 1.3 Searching for new sources of political energy

The Attlee and Thatcher governments did not pursue abstract justice, but tailored their political projects to the condition of country and the spirit of the times in which they governed. They understood the sources of energy in society and hitched their ideological project to them. They governed in a way that put down roots of popular and institutional support in the country, which in turn extended and then defended their goals. In short, they were able to transform the political circumstances they inherited precisely because they understood and mastered them.

The economic turmoil sparked by the financial crisis and the end of Labour’s period in government suggests the end of a political era and the beginning of something new. Some argue that a period of neo-liberalism, dating back to 1979, is now over; others that the juncture will prove to be less dramatic, or that the advent of New Labour marked a decisive turning point from the Conservative governments it followed. Either way, the contours of this current political age are not yet clear – and the Coalition government only seems capable of tactical manoeuvres in response to volatile public opinion.

With crisis in the financial markets and riots on the streets, the future is certainly up for grabs. Britain’s economic prosperity, its place in the world, its unity as a nation and the prospects of its people are less certain than for some time. The existence of a peacetime Coalition government is just one expression of that uncertainty. This presents a huge challenge for politics, but also an opportunity: to not only win power, but transform politics. This will require a political project that understands the new sources of energy in society so as to grasp the ideological agenda and redraw the electoral map. This paper explores how the centre-left in Britain could set about achieving that task.

## 2. THE CENTRE-LEFT'S POLITICAL CHALLENGES

The task of mastering the new political sociology of Britain is one that confronts all political parties. The analysis of sociological shifts presented here aims to be of interest and value across the ideological spectrum. However, the specific focus is on how a better understanding of the new sources of energy in society can help shed light on the challenges facing the centre-left in Britain, many of which are shared by socialist and social democratic parties across Europe.

As David Miliband has pointed out, Britain, Sweden, Germany France, Italy and Holland are now all governed by centre-right parties for the first time in the democratic era (Miliband 2011). This contrasts to the dominance of the centre-left across the leading EU countries in the late 1990s. Social democracy across Europe failed to sustain the political optimism and success of that era – and is now struggling to come to terms with the current political moment. In Britain, the immediate triggers for confronting the centre-left's dilemmas are Labour's comprehensive election defeat last year and the entry of the Liberal Democrats into coalition with the Conservatives. But the need for renewal is deeper and more fundamental.

For Labour, the task ahead is comparable to that faced by previous generations of thinkers and politicians following the 1931, 1951 and 1979 elections. On each occasion, the party left government and was out of power for well over a decade. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats face the paradox of being in government for the first time in 70 years, but having haemorrhaged support and confused its identity in the process. On previous occasions when Liberals have gone into power with Conservatives, they have emerged a much diminished political force. The prospects for the Liberal Democrats are, to a significant degree, contingent on the performance of the government and the party's strategy; there are big choices ahead. For Labour, in opposition, the challenges are clearer but no less profound. Four in particular stand out, each speaking to the importance of looking beyond debates about abstract justice or tinkering with voter targeting tactics.

### 2.1 The electoral challenge

At the last general election, Labour's vote share dropped to just 29 per cent, losing 94 seats in the process. It has lost 4.9 million votes since 1997, with around 2.8 million of those gone by 2001 and a further 1.2 million by 2005. There are just 10 Labour MPs out of 197 in the south of England outside London, with the party pinned back to the Midlands, the North, Scotland, Wales and inner cities. This puts in doubt Labour's position as a truly national party. Despite a revival in opinion poll ratings over the last year, support remains weak among vital groups of the electorate: in particular, middle income, older and Southern voters.<sup>1</sup> The risk for Labour is that its support becomes concentrated among particular groups of the electorate, like public sector workers, ethnic minorities and metropolitan voters, partly driven by the political polarisation provoked by the government's austerity measures.

For most of the 20th century, the electoral challenge for Labour was to sufficiently motivate its base of working-class supporters, while reaching out to middle-class voters, so as to secure a majority. This was always a caricature<sup>2</sup>, but over the years the basic formula became more strained, as the industrial working class got smaller and the professional middle class expanded. Since 1997, Labour has lost votes across all social

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1 YouGov poll for the Sunday Times, 11-12 August 2011: <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/yg-archives-pol-st-results-12-140811.pdf>

2 For example, there has always been a strong working class Tory vote and middle class intellectuals have formed a core part of Labour's support since the party's inception.

classes, as well as from both genders and all age groups. Combined with sociological shifts explored later in this paper, this suggests that the traditional ways of thinking about the electorate – and how to build centre-left majority coalitions – no longer works. For instance, people’s values and dispositions frame how they think about politics. Yet these do not neatly correlate with distinctions of social class, requiring a more three-dimensional view of the electorate (see forthcoming IPPR research).

## 2.2 The economic challenge

To regain economic credibility in the 1990s, Labour sought to convince voters, business people and the financial markets that it was comfortable with a market economy. The party made a virtue of sticking with the economic framework inherited from the Conservatives, with limited alterations. Light-touch regulation was thought capable of taming the excesses of capitalism, while its bounty could be used to deliver social justice. This strategy reaped major rewards for a decade, helped along by an unprecedented era of growth and prosperity across the West. This was effectively managed by Blair and Brown, enabling significant redistribution and investment in public services. However, the model proved to be highly vulnerable when the financial crisis hit, leaving Labour ideologically and politically exposed.

Most significantly, it was difficult for its leaders to credibly critique a system they had spent years cheerleading, despite the historic mission of social democracy to manage capitalism in the interests of ordinary working people. In the aftermath of the crisis, Labour had limited intellectual resources or alternative ideas to draw on. The space for critical, mainstream thinking on political economy had largely closed down for the best part of two decades. Since the credit crunch, new perspectives and ideas have started to emerge across the centre-left<sup>3</sup>. However, Labour is left with a considerable hole in its economic framework: both in relation to fiscal management and its attitude to British capitalism. As Andrew Gamble has argued, economic crises tend to help the centre-right (Gamble 2009), leaving the question of whether centre-left parties can prosper when the economy is not booming.

## 2.3 The governing challenge

New Labour advanced an essentially neo-Croslandite governing agenda: advancing economic prosperity through an accommodation with capitalism and pursuing social justice through the agency of the state. This delivered considerable results, such as limiting the spread of inequality, maintaining high employment and rescuing the public services. However, the consequences of market failure – whether in wages, housing or the environment – could only be partially ameliorated by the state. And efforts to improve society through bureaucratic direction, managerial control and central fiat were limited (and at times self-defeating).

One consequence of Labour being ‘too hands off’ with the market was that, in order to still pursue its goals, it ended up being ‘too hands on’ with the state. Rather than tackling market injustices at source, it attempted to ameliorate them afterwards through the state. This approach to statecraft sometimes seemed akin to running up a down escalator, delivering diminishing returns over time. In any case, the condition of the public finances makes it an implausible strategy for the foreseeable future. The centre-left has serious thinking to do about how to correct market outcomes at source, while not preventing economic prosperity, and how to rely less on the central state and higher public spending,

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, IPPR work on New Era Economics and its Commission on Growth and Prosperity.

while not abandoning its pursuit of social justice. This requires a profound rethinking of Labour's approach to governing and its model of change.

## 2.4 The cultural challenge

This is more nebulous than the previous three challenges, but related to them all. Over time, Labour has gradually become 'out of tune' with the mood of the country; in part, ironically, because of its desire to be associated with the modern and the new (Rutherford 2011). In the process, Labour has lost touch with the mainstream and the ordinary: whether it be anxiety about immigration, demoralisation in the public sector, or the desire for more than the bottom line. Neither the roots of this predicament nor its implications are straightforward. But central is the 'tin ear' to cultural sentiment and concerns, which have emerged from outside the Westminster village.

Exploring the cultural dimension provides insights that run across the challenges facing the centre-left. It shows the importance of responding to people's concerns about culture and identity, as well as their social class or material interests, in constructing a majoritarian project. And it sheds light on the alienation people can feel when the market, the state or society violate their dignity as human beings or undermine the basis of their human relationships. More broadly, it provides a reminder that giving expression to the national mood is both difficult and politically essential. This quality is hard to pin down, but Tony Blair had it in 1997, while Gordon Brown did not in 2010.

What unites these four challenges is that they rest on the fault lines of political sociology. None can be fully understood, let alone conquered, without an understanding of the social, economic and cultural forces shaping British society – and their consequences for politics. Each pinpoints a vital area where the centre-left is not currently setting the ideological agenda or reaching out into areas of popular support. This creates the risk of getting stuck in an intellectual and electoral cul-de-sac; clinging to an outdated approach to governing and standing for sectional interests. To put these challenges in context – and to think about the right response – it is worth reflecting on previous eras when changing circumstances in society have left Labour behind, both ideologically and electorally.

## 2.5 Labour's fluctuating ideological and electoral fortunes

After losing power in 1951, Labour was slow to come to terms with the spread of affluence and the rise of a consumer society, as the deprivations of war receded. And, having made such huge strides forward in government over a short space of time, the party was left struggling to articulate a clear future cause. This was the decade of an expanding middle class, rapid social mobility and an age of new aspirations and affluence. Labour was slow to adapt to these shifts, with honourable exceptions, like Herbert Morrison, who had long sought to extend Labour's appeal in London to the growing numbers of professional voters.

Demonstrating their adaptability, the Conservatives accepted the social democratic settlement they inherited from Attlee and turned it to their electoral advantage. It was Harold Macmillan's government that built hundreds of thousands of family homes, entrenching a cross-class alliance in support of the welfare state. He also reduced income tax and could credibly tell people they had 'never had it so good', as growth and prosperity for ordinary families advanced. One nation Conservatism stole Labour's governing appeal while presenting the party as economically divisive and culturally old-fashioned.

Attempting to diagnose the party's plight, Mark Abrams and Richard Rose's provocatively titled *Must Labour Lose?* pointed to the half million decline in the number of manual workers, alongside the one million rise in white collar workers, between 1951 and 1959 (Abrams and Rose 1960). Social scientists argued over the political impact of rising affluence and class change (Abrams 1960, Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1962) but other demographic factors were also important. For instance, in the 1959 election, Labour led the Tories by 48 to 45 per cent among men but trailed among women by 51 to 43 per cent (Pugh 2010). Despite its support for female suffrage, Labour failed to win a majority of women's votes on many occasions throughout the 20th century.

Political success returned when Harold Wilson captured the spirit of the moment – swinging 60s, Beatlemania and World Cup victory combined. He presented himself as a plausible national leader and Labour as the party ready to meet the challenges of the time. Downplaying class politics, Wilson's government promoted a modern agenda of technological advancement ('white heat' and all), expanded educational opportunity (such as the establishment of the Open University) and progressive social legislation (including the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality). This agenda was underpinned by Tony Crosland's ideological revisionism; redefining socialism as the pursuit of equality rather than necessarily the extension of public ownership (Crosland 1956).

However, by the late 1970s, changes in society had seriously undermined Labour's post-war electoral strategy and governing project. Keynesianism and corporatism appeared over run in the face of a more open international economy and the uncompetitiveness of British industry. The rise of identity politics and social movements, such as feminism and youth culture, left Labour looking old-fashioned once again. And the rise of individualism and consumerism rubbed up against the party's 'labourist' culture; overwhelmingly industrial, collectivist and male.

The failure of Labour governments in the 1960s and 1970s to grasp and shape this new era, such as missed opportunities to reform industrial relations and public housing on its terms, left the party on the intellectual and political defensive. And, in the 1980s, it became increasingly clear that economic and cultural changes meant that its traditional working-class base was no longer enough for Labour to win a majority (Hobsbawm and Jacques 1981). In the vacuum, Thatcherism became ideologically and electorally dominant.

As with Harold Wilson in the 1960s, success only returned for Labour once it began to recalibrate its intellectual and political approach in light of the country Britain was becoming in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this process, journals like *Marxism Today*, remnants of the 1960s 'New left' and interventions such as *Southern Discomfort* blazed a trail (Radice 1993); albeit controversially at the time. However, it was not until the mid-1990s that Labour understood the political sociology of Britain of the time, harnessing it to underpin political success. This perspective on economic, social and cultural forces – described in the next chapter as the 'modernisation era' – provided the intellectual and electoral foundations of New Labour.

### 3. THE ‘MODERNISATION ERA’ AND THE POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF THE MID-1990S

There are many forces and figures that shaped the development of the centre-left from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The policy revisions and electoral advances were the result of multiple factors, defying any simple explanation. One important dimension, relevant to this paper, was the nexus of sociological analysis and political interpretation which helped to underpin the dominant perspective on Britain at that time. This perspective – described here as the ‘modernisation era’ – significantly informed New Labour’s governing agenda and electoral appeal.

Almost two decades on, the modernisation era largely remains the default perspective on Britain’s political sociology on the centre-left – and across much of the political class. This is despite decisive events, dominant trends and theoretical critiques undermining its validity and utility, as chapter 4 goes on to show. Therefore, articulating this perspective provides the analytical anchor for thinking about the new sources of energy in British politics today. Set out below are the four core elements of the modernisation era, each building on the other.

#### 3.1 The sociological context of the modernisation era

The major economic, social and cultural shifts that took place in Britain – and much of the western world – from the mid-1970s provided the context for the modernisation era:

- A shift away from manufacturing towards a predominantly service-based economy, driven in part by technological advances and international competition
- A decline in the number of manual and industrial jobs, alongside a growth in professional and managerial occupations
- Growth in the size of the affluent, consumer-orientated middle class, alongside a reduction in the size of the ‘traditional’ working class
- An expansion in higher education participation and the continuing rise in the return to skills in the labour market
- An increase in the number of women working, especially mothers, matched by a drop in the male employment rate (and the shrinking of the ‘male breadwinner’ model)
- A shift away from the nuclear family, with lower rates of marriage, higher rates of divorce, more single-parent families and greater cohabitation
- A rise in owner-occupation alongside a decline in social renting
- A greater prominence of identity politics – related to the environment, feminism, disability, race and sexuality – as traditional forms of association, like trade unions and organised religion, contracted
- A decline in deference as attitudes to lifestyle and personal morality became more permissive
- An increase in the amount of time and money devoted to the consumption of private leisure goods and services, plus the spread of travel and technology.

Each of these shifts had its own particular logic and dynamic; they did not happen simultaneously or according to neat or linear patterns. Some trace their roots back to the late 1950s and 1960s, such as shifts in the composition of industries and occupations and their impact on the class structure (for example, Goldthorpe et al 1969). Others, such as the explosion of media, information and communications technology, were only in their relative infancy in the 1980s.

Importantly, these trends did not occur exogenously to wider events or political action (or indeed to each other). Some were explicitly the result of government decisions – like industrial restructuring – while others were more the product of social and cultural shifts – like the changing role of women in society (Crompton 2009). The central point is that these trends were real, profound and not unrelated. And they added up to a major change in the nature of British society and the context for politics to which the centre-left had to respond.

### 3.2 The theoretical foundations of the modernisation era

These economic, social and cultural shifts provided the backdrop to the political renewal of the centre-left in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A source of impetus for that project came from a broad sociological interpretation of these changes, which was influential on New Labour. While not a single school of thinking, this comprised a set of core concepts and insights which dominated sociology departments – and, to a significant extent, popular discourse – at that time.

Central figures in this intellectual movement were sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (Giddens 1991a, Beck 1992, Beck et al 1994). Ronald Inglehart was also important, though his work focuses on shifts in values rather than sociology directly (Inglehart 1989). Daniel Bell's work on post-industrial society (Bell 1976) can be seen as a grandfather of this perspective, though there are important distinctions from the later school of sociology (Doogan 2010). Each of these thinkers has a distinctive body of work. However, it is possible to identify a set of sociological perspectives which, they argued, were central to understanding late 20th century British society. These ideas contributed to shaping the intellectual climate in which Labour rethought its political orientation, especially following the 1992 general election.

Fundamental to the sociological foundations of the modernisation era was the idea that class was an increasingly redundant concept in understanding the organisation of society, the experience of people's lives and the dynamics of economic and social change. Talk about the **'end of class'** became widespread (Crompton 2009), based on three major factors:

- 1. The breakdown of the stable, ordered occupational class structures of the Fordist era** – prompted by: the process of deindustrialisation; the rise of flexible production; the spread of atypical employment patterns; and the advance of modern human resource management practices (such as delayering and the decline of collective bargaining). These trends were seen as characteristic of a move towards 'post-Fordism' (Murray 1988) and 'disorganised capitalism' (Lash and Urry 1987).
- 2. The rise of cultural concerns and non-class identity politics** – following the growth of new social movements associated with gender, race, disability and sexuality, which traditional class-based claims to justice and recognition could not accommodate (Giddens 1991b). One aspect of this was the retreat of a 'labourist' culture, where large workplaces with active trade unions were central to life in particular towns and cities.
- 3. The increasing anachronism of class-based politics** – caused by the declining size of the (largely male) industrial working class and the broader class dealignment in voting patterns (Hobsbawm and Jacques 1981). Society was seen to cleave less simply and dramatically along class lines, while people were less likely to view their interests and structure their associations through the lens of class.

In short, class was viewed as increasingly outdated in real life and invalid as a concept for understanding society; replaced by a more complex and fragmented picture of identities and symbols (Lash and Urry 1994). The related '**cultural turn**' in sociology emphasised the explanatory value of cultural factors independent of their material or economic context – and a shift from production to consumption as central to analysing society. This marked a major departure from most post-war sociology, which had focused on structured relations of classes to the means of production or within the labour market (Crompton 2009: 23).

More broadly, the modernisation era rejected 'grand narratives', whether in the form of post-War Marxist and Weberian-inspired sociology, or the more patterned 'industrial society' thesis of the 1970s. Giddens, Beck and others argued that Western societies were entering '**post modernity**'<sup>4</sup>, a 'new epoch' characterised by rapid transformation which rendered traditional sociological concepts inadequate to the task of understanding contemporary trends. New Labour's rhetorical focus on the need to adapt to a constantly and rapidly changing world can be traced to this analysis.

The phenomenon of **globalisation** – economic, cultural and political – was central to the modernisation era perspective. As collective identities based on production relations declined, **individualism** and **consumerism** were seen as the rising forces. This was associated with the triumph of autonomy and choice over deference and tradition – in the workplace, at home and in public life. As society became more affluent, people shifted from being motivated by basic material and security concerns towards '**post-material**' **values** and the desire for authenticity and self-actualisation (Inglehart 1989). This was linked to the advance of **cosmopolitanism**, embodying a shift in focus from the particular and the economic to the universal and cultural.

These were not, of course, the only analytical perspectives on the sociological changes taking place in Britain during the 1980s and early 1990s. There were significant dissenting voices at the time. For example, John Goldthorpe's ongoing research suggesting the relative stability of the occupational structure, Richard Sennett's work on the impact of economic change on the experience of working life (Sennett and Cobb 1988), and the analysis underpinning Will Hutton's proposals for stakeholder capitalism (Hutton 1995) were important counter-arguments from the left. Meanwhile, rising salience of cultural concerns in the 1980s also found expression through authoritarian and nationalist sentiment, which Thatcher effectively tapped into.

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<sup>4</sup> Sometimes referred to as a 'second modernity' or 'reflexive modernisation'.

### 3.3 The political orientation of the modernisation era

Like the term New Labour itself, the ‘Third Way’ has become a label tossed around to the point of meaninglessness. Quite unfairly, it is often reduced to a caricature of political triangulation. This neglects the serious attempt it embodied to ground a project of political renewal in a sociological analysis (for example, Giddens 1998). It is precisely this spirit of engagement between sociology and politics that the centre-left needs today, which this paper hopes to spark.

Crystallised in the early 1990s, the political orientation of the modernisation era amounted to a profound shift in centre-left thinking (for example, the Social Justice Commission 1994). It responded to the political weaknesses of Labour during the 1980s and the economic, social and cultural changes since the party was last in government. Core aspects of this orientation have retained a strong hold over the centre-left – and much of the wider political class. Its core insights, flowing from its sociological foundations, can be summarised as follows:

- **An embrace of globalisation:** the process of globalisation was intensifying international economic competition, placing policy constraints on governments. Globalisation required adaptation, but also created opportunities; through access to new markets, increased travel and communication, and greater cultural diversity. The end of the cold war marked the latest stage in the advance of universal, enlightenment values. The agency of nation states was being undermined by transnational corporations, international institutions and a new ‘global civil society’. In a more interconnected and interdependent world, the centre-left should redouble its commitment to internationalism, including a renewed pro-Europeanism.
- **A focus on supply-side economics:** an increasingly open international economy rendered industrial policy, corporatism and Keynesian demand management implausible, while free markets and competition worked better. The task for governments was to reap the benefits of globalisation while helping citizens adapt to the constant changes it brought (embodied in the phrase ‘adapt or die’). Capitalism could be tamed of its tendency to instability through limited regulation and sound macro-economic management (to the mutual benefit of business and workers). Government’s role was to improve the supply-side of the economy – through micro-growth policies – and step in when markets failed. An enabling welfare state and the renewal of public services became central economic as well as social policy objectives.
- **A priority to education and skills:** rather than seeking to affect the structure of the economy or regulate the labour market, improving levels of education and skills among the population assumed a central role in advancing growth, living standards and social justice (alongside an active welfare system). This strategy was based on the importance of macro-economic stability and flexible labour markets to achieving high levels of employment, in the context of skill-biased technological change and rising returns to education. This was premised on the expected rapid expansion of well paid, high-quality jobs and the decline of poorly paid, low-quality work, due to outsourcing, deindustrialisation and technological advances.
- **A shift to meritocracy over class conflict:** in place of class as the dominant factor in structuring economic conflicts and people’s identity, individualism recognised that people wanted to pursue their own ends. Personal autonomy was prioritised over tradition, hierarchy, deference and conformity. The aspiration was for people to be able to ‘shake off’ the baggage of their background and rise to their own potential. This

was embodied in the priority given to meritocracy – or equality of opportunity – such as through better education and access to homeownership (rather than material equality).

- **A promotion of liberal, multicultural values:** the retreat of class was accompanied by a more assertively secular, rights-based politics on the centre-left. This was aimed at countering discrimination and promoting liberal values (in the context of greater ethnic, religious and cultural diversity). This was associated with a stronger focus on 'equalities' issues – related to gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and disability – which found expression through policies like childcare and parental leave but also the wider 'judicialisation' of politics.
- **A revised sense of responsibility and patriotism:** alongside the strengthening of this rights-based, individualist approach, was a renewed language and focus on personal responsibility and patriotism. This was partly in response to the centre-left's perceived 'weak flanks' on issues like defence, welfare and crime in the 1980s (and the acceptance of both individual agency and structural factors in explaining social problems). It also responded to tensions raised by ideas of 'mutual obligation' throughout the history of the Labour Party (Pugh 2010).
- **A belief in pragmatism over ideology:** finally, all-encompassing ideologies were seen as increasingly anachronistic in the modern world (Shtromas 1994). They were replaced by pragmatism and the belief in the capacity of elite decision-makers and rational managers to solve social and economic problems. This was based on the assumption that most people wanted to be left alone and governed effectively. The closest thing to an ideology was the belief that rapid change – in almost every aspect of economic, social and cultural life – was a core characteristic of modern society. The priority for the centre-left was national renewal and modernisation, following the sense of drift and decline under John Major's government.

This account of the political orientation of the modernisation era is highly stylised and provides only a partial insight into the intellectual development of New Labour. The influence of communitarian thinkers (like Amitai Etzioni and John MacMurray), the New Liberal legacy (such as LT Hobhouse and John Hobson) and previous generations of Labour revisionists (notably Tony Crosland) can all be traced. Those who argue that New Labour had no roots in the intellectual and political traditions of the British left are well wide of the mark (Diamond 2004). There were other significant political influences too, such as Bill Clinton and the New Democrats (Reich 1992). However, stripping out the tactical and the transitory, the orientation of the modernisation era is an essential starting point for considering the political sociology of Britain today. And that includes the perspective on electoral strategy which it informed.

### 3.4 The electoral imperatives of the modernisation era

During the 1980s and into the 1990s it became increasingly clear that the Labour party could not win an election simply by motivating the industrial working class (Hobsbawm and Jacques 1981, Heath et al 1994). This section of the electorate was in decline, while class-aligned voting had in any case weakened. ‘Working-class Tories’ formed a core plank of Thatcher’s popular coalition. Labour’s electoral challenge also had a crucial geographic dimension, with support concentrated in urban areas, the north, the midlands and Scotland and Wales. The absence of Labour support in southern England was seen as a major barrier to winning an election (Radice 1992). In this context, the English middle classes – affluent and aspirational – took on increasing importance, because of their expanding size, geographic location and volatile voting habits (Gould 1999).

The combination of these political imperatives and the sociological insights of the modernisation era informed a division of the electorate <sup>5</sup> into two large groups: ‘core working class’ voters and ‘swing middle class’ voters. This distinction rested on a set of assumptions thought to be dominant among these two groups:

#### **Middle-class ‘swing’ voters:**

- On middle incomes and with (material) aspirations for themselves
- Living in the midlands and southern England
- Working in service industries in the private sector
- Centrist political opinions, not strongly held, without party loyalty
- Supportive of a market economy, sceptical about the state
- Market research class ABC1 <sup>6</sup>

#### **Working-class ‘core’ voters:**

- On low incomes and with (social) solidarity with others
- Living in big cities, the north of England, Scotland and Wales
- Working in manufacturing and the public sector, or claiming welfare
- Leftist political opinions, strongly held, with ongoing loyalty to Labour
- Sceptical of a market economy, supportive of the state
- Market research class C2DE <sup>7</sup>

Broadly speaking, this distinction has remained the dominant frame for thinking about the basis of a centre-left majoritarian coalition (which is itself largely a variation on previous post-war formulas). Given the presumed reliability of ‘core’ voters, in spite of voter dealignment, the key group was the middle-class ‘swing’ voters; especially those living in marginal constituencies in England. In particular, the concerns of the so-called ‘median voter’ – taken to represent the mid-point view on any given political issue – have defined the ‘centre-ground’ of British politics for the last twenty years. The symbolic person

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5 Or, more precisely, that part of the electorate thought to be decisive in delivering a majority Labour government.

6 This includes higher or intermediate managerial, administrative or professional employees, and supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional workers.

7 This includes skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and casual or lowest grade workers, pensioners and others who depend on the welfare state for their income.

thought to hold these archetypal views has been given various different labels, from ‘Worcester woman’ to ‘Mondeo man’.

In practice, Labour massively increased its vote in the 1997 election across all voter groups and social classes. And, since then, the loss of support has been similarly ecumenical. However, debate since the last general election, about which voters Labour most needs to focus on to win a future majority, has been more polarised; demonstrating continued dominance of the modernisation era framework. This debate about whether it is working-class C1DE voters or middle-class AB/C2s who are most important not only feels circular and constraining, but a highly partial picture of reality.

The issue for the remainder of this paper is whether the root cause of this problem is that while these psephological labels and the electoral strategies they inform remain the dominant political currency, the foundation of political sociology on which they once rested has crumbled away. Before turning to that question, the table below seeks to summarise the spirit and sensibility of the modernisation era, including the core concepts, ideas and language it defined itself against.

| IN                                       | OUT                            |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Progress                                 | Preservation                   |
| Modernity                                | Tradition                      |
| Change                                   | Stability and protection       |
| Mobility (both geographic and economic)  | Place and roots                |
| Universal, abstract values               | Particular, contingent values  |
| Personal rights (and responsibility)     | Mutual obligations, solidarity |
| Individual autonomy                      | Collective dependency          |
| Adaptability, flexibility                | Structure, institutions        |
| Secularism, rationalism                  | Religion and faith             |
| Gender, race, sexuality, disability, age | Class                          |
| Universalism                             | Nationalism                    |
| Pragmatism                               | Ideology                       |
| Suburban, metropolitan                   | Rural, industrial              |
| Liberalism                               | Conservatism                   |
| Rights-based politics                    | Democratic politics            |
| Consumption                              | Production                     |

## 4. THE DOMINANT TRENDS AND NEW SOURCES OF ENERGY IN BRITISH POLITICS

In retrospect, many of the predictions about the ‘sources of energy’ that Geoff Mulgan thought would shape the future of British politics back in 1991 – with both Margaret Thatcher and the Soviet Union only recently departed – have turned out to look highly prophetic. He pointed to: the magnetic pull of Europe; newly confident cities and regions; the rebirth of civic activism; environmental movements; the cult of fitness and health; the ‘life politics’ of reproduction and genetics; grey power; the movement of women into work; increasing numbers of professionals; constitutional reform; and assertive Islam (Mulgan 1991). Unsurprisingly, he did not hit the mark entirely, predicting a revival of manufacturing and rented housing (with services retrenching and owner occupation passing saturation). Neither, of course, happened during the 1990s.

The task for the centre-left – is to replicate that spirit of fresh thinking and open engagement between sociology and politics that occurred in the 1980s and early 1990s, which Mulgan’s analysis embodied. Part of the reason that popular arguments about whether to ‘shift to the left or hold to the centre’, ‘stick to New Labour or junk it’ or ‘focus on core working-class voters or swing middle-class voters’ are so unproductive that they now speak to a caricature of Britain. The political sociology on which those insights were once based has fallen away, leaving just the words; although, used by the political class, they no longer describe a world that exists or that voters recognise.

The route to solving this problem lies in reconstructing a foundation of political sociology for Britain today and the years ahead. This does not mean discarding all the insights and analysis of the modernisation era, but using them as the starting point for thinking about what has changed and what is new. This can be seen in the decisive events and defining shifts since the mid-1990s – alongside new theoretical perspectives on political sociology. These provide the context for understanding the new sources of energy in politics. These are the resources with which an ideological agenda that ‘goes with the grain’ of society can be advanced and enduring popular and institutional support in the country can be put down.

### 4.1 New theoretical perspectives on political sociology

The starting point for rethinking the modernisation era is the theoretical critique of this thesis from within sociology itself. The rejection of class as an organisational concept was based largely on a reaction against the ‘employment-aggregate’ approach to sociological analysis, associated with John Goldthorpe<sup>8</sup>. This was criticised for being too narrowly focused on occupation and, even then, overly male-centric because it analysed the position of the head of the household in the class structure (despite the rise of dual-earner families as more women worked).

It is certainly true that people’s identities and associations are not only structured around employment – and that cultural as well as economic factors affect how people’s lives go. However, that does not mean that class is dead. Power, wealth and advantage continue to be patterned (not random) and reproduced across generations. Conflicts of interest in the labour market and over material resources have not withered away. Suggesting that class is a redundant concept also abandons a valuable analytic tool in understanding modern society. As Crompton argues: ‘If causes simply cannot be identified, and if the social world is indeed only a fluid, constantly changing world of representations, then this leads to a position in which it is highly problematic to identify policies or strategies that might bring

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<sup>8</sup> Though Goldthorpe’s early work combined analysis of large-scale occupational surveys with more qualitative research to gain insights into shifts in the class structure and their political implications (Goldthorpe et al 1969).

about either emancipatory social change or a reduction in material inequalities' (Crompton 2009: 26).

In recent years, class analysis has been enriched by a plurality of approaches, exploring the different dimensions of people's relations to one another and the sources of their identity. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has sought to draw out differences based on people's tastes, lifestyles and consumption. He argues that classes are not real, objectively constituted groups, but that class boundaries should instead be understood in terms of social practices (Bourdieu 1986). In his research into French society, Bourdieu drew a distinction within the expanding middle class between the 'bourgeoisie' – high on economic capital but relatively low on cultural capital – and the 'intellectuals' – high on cultural capital but relatively low on economic capital. Adopting a similar methodology, researchers have identified clear patterns to cultural tastes and practice in modern Britain, with the central distinction being between 'cultural omnivores' (who engage extensively in culture of many forms) and those who 'consume' less culture of all varieties (Bennett et al 2009).

Picking up the spirit of EP Thompson, Richard Sennett and Paul Willis (Thompson 1968, Sennett and Cobb 1973, Willis 1977), a series of ethnographic studies have analysed the experiences of class in modern society. Rogaly and Taylor's research into working class culture in housing estates in Norwich (Rogaly and Taylor 2011) and the long-term study into how people manage work and family life in London and Manchester<sup>9</sup> are powerful recent examples that explore the 'positional suffering' and other relational aspects of 'ordinary life' from a class perspective. Other studies have explored the how the lack of economic, social and cultural capital can result in low self-respect, a lack of agency and a sense of alienation (Skeggs 2004).

From an occupational perspective, the significant growth in the size of Goldthorpe's 'service class' arguably makes this a less useful analytic category. Researchers working within this tradition have pointed to the increasingly dominant role of a transnational 'executive class'. Largely found in the business and financial elite, this is a group separated from the rest of society by its extreme wealth and exclusive culture (Carroll 2010). Over the last three decades, it has used its political power to capture a large portion of the proceeds of growth – contributing to high levels of inequality since the end of the 1970s (Hacker and Pierson 2011).

There are further competing perspectives on contemporary class in popular and academic literature. Richard Florida identifies the rise of a 'creative class' – mobile, autonomous and trend setting – thought to comprise a third of the workforce in countries like the US and the UK (Florida 2003). By contrast, Guy Standing sees the 'precarariat' – a growing number united by the insecurity and powerlessness spread by neo-liberalism – as being the dominant force today (Standing 2011). Adopting a more cultural perspective, Owen Jones has explored the demonisation of the working class in modern society (Jones 2011), reflecting a long-standing distinction between 'roughs' and 'respectables' in British social history (Pugh 2010:16).

In addition to demonstrating that class is different but not dead, sociological critiques of the modernisation era also highlight that modern societies, like Britain, experience significant continuity as well as real change. Breathless notions of 'epochal shifts',

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9 Living and labouring in London and Manchester: <http://www.geog.ox.ac.uk/research/transformations/projects/living.html>

constant transformation and hyper-fluidity underpinned the idea that ‘post-modernity’ implied no patterns, no roots and no history. More broadly the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature debunks the idea that there is an inevitable and homogenising logic to economic globalisation (Hall and Soskice 2001) or only one route to economic success in the modern world (as suggested by proponents of the ‘Washington Consensus’).

In a similar vein, Kevin Doogan has shown that capital and corporations are not utterly rootless, technological changes have not penetrated every industry and permanent employment has not been consigned to history (Doogan 2009). Ironically, the culture of hierarchical management and bureaucratic accountability in much of the public sector suggest that ‘Fordism’ remains a feature of the British economy.

Finally, the modernisation era analysis has come to be seen as naive in suggesting that sociological changes take place according to a natural logic, exogenous to political actions or ideological projects (Urry 1988). This view of autonomous change – disembedded from particular times and places – neglects the role of ideology and political agency, with many pointing to the significance of neo-liberalism over the last three decades (Crompton 2009, Doogan 2009). It is certainly the case that the deliberate actions of governments, companies, social movements and citizens have all had a major hand in shaping the course of events. The idea that society is on an inexorable journey towards ‘rationality’, ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ does not seem to account for the resilience, idiosyncrasies and path dependency in so many aspects of our economic, social and cultural life.

#### 4.2 Decisive events altering the context for political sociology

Alongside new sociological thinking, there have been a set of decisive events since the mid-1990s which have undermined the foundations of the modernisation era and contributed to reshaping the political sociology of Britain. Three stand out in particular, relating to the economy, international security and the governance of the country:

- **The credit crunch and financial crisis:** This not only brought global financial institutions to their knees, it dramatically ended two decades of rising confidence in the capacity of self-regulating markets (especially financial markets) to manage economic risk and smooth the instability of capitalism. These events have led to low growth and large public sector debt in Europe and the US, contrasted with impressive performance in emerging countries with distinctive economic models, such as the ‘BRIC’ nations – Brazil, Russia, India and China. The result is a major intellectual reassessment of political economy and the conditions necessary for growth, competitiveness, fiscal sustainability, employment – and meeting the challenge of dangerous climate change.
- **Terror attacks and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars:** The 9/11 atrocity, followed by the 7/7 attacks, punctured the relative international peace and optimism of the post-cold war period. The rise of Islamic extremism has brought into sharp focus some of the schisms of culture and identity in open, liberal Western societies such as Britain. As well as raising tough questions about multiculturalism and diversity, they also dent the confidence of those previously confident in the spread of modern, enlightenment values. The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have changed the terms of Britain’s engagement with the world – and popular sentiment towards the armed forces at home – though it is still too early to assess the lasting impact of the ‘Arab Spring’ and NATO’s intervention in Libya.

- **Devolution and reforms to the state:** The last decade has seen major changes to the constitutional landscape in Britain, heralding a sharper territorial dimension to politics and the need to respond to distinct national and local political cultures. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and London (and to some directly elected town and city Mayors) has decentralised power but left unresolved questions about the union and the governance of England. Freedom of information has opened up government and the introduction of non-first-past-the-post voting systems (such as for the Scottish, Welsh, London and European elections) has given new electoral space to smaller parties. The Human Rights Act and the creation of the Supreme Court have reshaped the relationship between the judiciary and parliament, which remains volatile, as the furore over super-injunctions demonstrated.

Each of these events means that the context for politics today is significantly different from that which confronted the centre-left in the mid-1990s. That was an era defined by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the onward march of globalisation and the long Conservative dominance of the central state.

It is worth reflecting, in particular, on the impact these events have had on the nation state itself, in the context of a global shift in economic and political power from the north and west to the east and the south. In relation to the economy, the state has reasserted its ability to shape market outcomes, intervening dramatically to preserve the banking system from meltdown and preventing recession turning into depression. However, since then, states in both Europe and the US have struggled to deliver a coordinated long-term response on issues like growth, public debt and financial market reform. It remains to be seen whether the 1990s will prove to have been the high watermark of international institutions like the EU and the World Trade Organisation, or whether they will be revived as states struggle to master global challenges alone.

The impacts of international security crises have been similarly paradoxical, with states marshalling huge military power abroad but vulnerable to random acts of terror at home. Constitutional changes mean there are now more centres of power and greater checks on the executive, though the British state remains highly centralised. Devolution has not quashed Scottish nationalism, with the prospect of a referendum on independence now a real possibility. At the same time, debates and dilemmas about England and Englishness have come to the surface (Kenny and Lodge 2009). Electoral reforms have given some new space to more diverse political voices, though the impact of the Coalition government on the shape of party politics is far from clear.

### 4.3 Defining shifts reshaping political sociology

In addition to theoretical critiques and decisive events, the modernisation era perspective has been overtaken by a new set of actual sociological shifts, different from those which formed the context for politics in the mid-1990s. Mastering the new political sociology of Britain starts by understanding these shifts – and their implications for politics. This sheds light on where the new sources of political energy are coming from and what resources they provide for shaping a transformative centre-left project.

Clearly not everything has changed in British society over the last two decades. Some trends have continued – like the decline of manufacturing – while others have intensified – like the expansion of higher education. In other areas, forces which were dominant in the mid-1990s appear to have run out of steam, like the growth of female employment and the rise in homeownership. There are also issues which were not significant 20 years ago

but are increasingly potent now: such as higher migration flows, an ageing society and the explosion of digital technology and social media. The political significance of these shifts is not set in stone, nor is their future direction; these will be shaped by the action of leaders and citizens alike.

What follows is not a comprehensive or exhaustive account of economic, social and cultural trends in Britain today; less still an attempt at futurology. Instead, a set of major sociological shifts are outlined that fulfil two criteria. First, that they are significant in understanding the forces in society shaping politics today, and second, that they provide insights into what has changed about Britain's political sociology since the mid-1990s. Taken together, they paint a picture of the condition of the country and the character of the electorate, in which the centre-left's ideological agenda and electoral strategy must be grounded.

The trends discussed below focus largely on objective and material changes, rather than subjective or experiential ones (though not exclusively). This is partly because these are more visible and easily quantified, but also because subsequent IPPR papers will specifically address the political consequences of changes in cultural values in greater depth. In some areas, the direction of changes identified here is more certain, perhaps reflecting deeper, underlying factors. In others, the future is highly contingent on events and human agency; not least the impact of the economy and the current government's policies.

### **1. The labour market is 'polarising' with growth in professional and managerial occupations as well as in lower level service sector employment, alongside a 'hollowing out' of mid- skill manual and administrative jobs.**

*In the mid-1990s, the defining labour market shift was from manufacturing to services. The advance of globalisation and technology was expected to drive expansion in jobs at the top of the labour market and retrenchment at the bottom.*

- Projections suggest an additional 5.1 million jobs in managerial and professional occupations between 1997 and 2017. Personal, sales and customer service occupations are also expected to grow, by 1.5 million jobs over the two decades (UKCES 2008).
- By contrast, administrative and secretarial jobs and skilled trades and machine and transport occupations are set to contract by 1.5 million over the same period. Elementary jobs, requiring few skills, are expected to drop by 200,000 (UKCES 2008).
- While public sector employment will drop over the coming years, due to fiscal consolidation, demand for public services is very likely to rise (for instance in childcare, social care, health and higher education) (Doogan 2009).
- Half of the net 2 million additional jobs projected between 2007 and 2017 are expected to be part-time (UKCES 2008). Self-employment is set to fall slightly as a share of employment in the years to 2017, following rapid growth in the 1980s (UKCES 2008).
- The predicted 'death' of permanent jobs has not come to pass, with no decline in average job tenure over the last 25 years (Faggio et al 2011). However, 'casualisation' and poor job quality is characteristic of certain sub-sectors (Lloyd et al 2008).

These labour market shifts mean that social mobility<sup>10</sup> is unlikely to be driven simply by changes in the occupational structure, even if Britain is able to take advantage from rising demand among the expanding global middle class. Overall the pace of employment change has slowed considerably in the last two decades and there will continue to be a demand for labour that cannot be outsourced or automated. Importantly, these include traditionally low-skilled jobs (like cleaning) but also those dependent on human interactions of many kinds (often requiring sophisticated ‘soft’ skills). There is evidence that the expansion in professional jobs drives local employment growth, as people seek others to serve them coffee, look after their children and clean their homes (Sissons 2011).

This reality requires more than just supply-side measures to prepare people to take advantage of globalisation. For a start, the domestic economy remains highly significant (alongside Britain’s export performance) in shaping employment outcomes. And patterns of labour demand will have a big impact on the quantity and quality of job opportunities in the years ahead. This is certainly the case in relation to skills, where improvements in supply have not always been matched by increases in employer demand or utilisation (Felstead et al 2007).

The central labour market divide is no longer between manufacturing and services, given that the latter now accounts for around four in five workers<sup>11</sup>. The key distinctions are increasingly around the experience of work between service sector occupations: levels of remuneration, job security, work intensity, task discretion, opportunities for advancement and access to wider benefits like pensions and parental leave (Green 2011). The remaining 6 million jobs in the manufacturing sector tend, on average, to be better paid and higher quality.

The expanding professional and managerial class, across both public and private sectors, will only become a more significant electoral group. By 2017 they are expected to account for 47 per cent of all employees, up from 37 per cent in 1997 (UKCES 2008). But the decline of heavy industry – and the forms of political identity and association it underpinned – does not mean the end of the ‘working class’. There remain a large number of currently low-paid, low-status jobs, which are not going to disappear; accounting for over 11 million workers by 2017<sup>12</sup>. Crucially, this group is more female, part-time and service sector than the traditional notions of the working class.

As the public sector contracts, private sector workers – already 79 per cent of all employees – will assume even greater political importance (ONS 2011a)<sup>13</sup>. Almost half of them (48 per cent) work in firms of less than 50 people, up from 44 per cent in 1994. There are also now 3.6 million sole traders (BIS 2011), creating the basis for a potential alliance between temporary or agency workers and those professionals choosing to work freelance or self-employed around the protections they receive from the law and the welfare state (currently limited for both groups as they are not permanently employed).

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10 More precisely, ‘intra-generational’ and ‘absolute’ social mobility (see Cabinet Office 2011, p 15 for definitions).

11 The other fifth of jobs are shared fairly evenly between manufacturing and construction.

12 Comprising personal service, sale and customer service, machine and transport operatives and elementary occupations (UKCES 2008).

13 This in the context of rising ‘sectoral envy’, occasionally stoked by the current government, such as over public sector pensions. The higher earnings of the average public sector worker are largely accounted for by their higher qualifications and greater experience (Dolton and Makepeace 2011).

**2. The living standards of working people are stagnating as the share of national wealth going to low and middle earners declines and average wages flatten, having failed to keep pace with either rising productivity or prices.**

*In the mid-1990s, average household incomes grew strongly, albeit combined with rising poverty and inequality. Economic growth and high employment were thought to be the conditions necessary to advance the prosperity of working people.*

- Median wages stagnated between 2003 and 2008, prior to the recession, despite GDP growing by 11 per cent over this period. This raises the prospect that the link between growth and average wages has broken, as in the USA (Plunkett 2011).
- The share of GDP going to pay packets has declined since the late 1970s, contributing to greater reliance on the state to top up wages. In 1988, 60 per cent of household income came from wages; falling to 51 per cent in 2008 (Social Trends).
- Even more significantly, rising earnings inequality means that workers in the bottom half of the wage distribution now receive just £12 of every £100 of national income generated, down from £16 in 1977; a 26 per cent drop (Whittaker and Savage 2011).
- Child poverty fell by 900,000 between 1998-1999 and 2009-2010 and pensioner poverty by 600,000, after two decades of consistent rises, supported by significant redistribution through the tax credit system (HBAI 2011).
- While higher qualifications continue to improve people's employment and earnings prospects, especially university degrees, gaining certain vocational qualifications has not proved to offer a route to career progression or higher wage (Wolf 2011).

It is not yet clear whether the squeeze on average wages is a temporary blip or a more permanent feature of the British economy. Higher levels of earnings inequality and the shift in national wealth from labour to capital are certainly long-standing trends. In the short term, rising inflation, public spending reductions, high personal debt and sluggish growth leave the prospect of rising prosperity for ordinary families in real doubt. The governor of the Bank of England has predicted a greater squeeze on the living standards of average households than at any time since the 1920s. At present, weak productivity is holding down pay, but helping to keep unemployment in check (Philpott 2011).

Even if the economy strengthens, it is far from certain whether workers on low and middle incomes will 'share in the proceeds of growth' (Plunkett 2011). If they do not, the state's ability to subsidise wages, through the tax credit system, to compensate for low pay will be severely constrained by the fiscal position. At the same time, neither shifts in the occupational structure nor the acquisition of qualifications (especially non-graduate, vocational ones) offer a sure route to rising affluence among the ranks of working people. This leaves the centre-left confronting a very different situation from the early 1990s, when there was high unemployment but rising wages for those who had jobs.

These trends will make family finances and national prosperity central political issues over the coming years, with wages, prices, debt, jobs and tax likely to be top voter concerns. There is also likely to be sharper conflict over the distribution of material resources and economic power; compared to the late 1990s when both household income and public spending were rising strongly. This creates the basis for a coalition of low and middle income voters in support of measures to raise living standards. They may, for instance,

find high earnings inequality or unearned wealth less acceptable if it is seen to be stunting their prosperity and destabilising the economy. However, economic insecurity could find more divisive political expression, setting one struggling group against another. Whether it be public versus private, young versus old, north versus south or migrant versus indigenous, a period of austerity could undermine solidarity.

### **3. A major divide is emerging around the age at which women partner and parent, against the backdrop of a continuing rise in non-traditional family forms and a plateau in rates of female employment (a halt in the decline of male employment).**

*In the mid-1990s, female employment rates were continuing to grow, while male employment was still declining in the wake of industrial re-structuring. The nuclear family was in retreat as lone-parent households and cohabitation rose, while marriage rates declined.*

- There were almost 30 per cent fewer births to women aged under 25 in 2008 than in 1988 (down from 251,600 to 180,7000) and nearly three times more births to women aged 35 and over (up from 56,000 to 142,6000) (Social Trends).
- The average age at which women get married has risen from 26.3 in 1991 to 31.0 in 2008, and for men from 28.4 to 33.6 over the same period (Social Trends).
- The proportion of children living with married parents dropped from 72 per cent in 1997 to 63 per cent in 2009, while the share living with cohabiting parents and lone parents both rose (from 8 to 13 per cent and 20 to 24 per cent respectively) (Social Trends).
- The female employment rate climbed from 56 per cent in 1971 to 72.3 per cent in 1998, but only rose a further 2.4 percentage points by 2008. Over the last decade male employment rates have stabilised after big falls in the 1980s (Social Trends).
- The proportion of households with all adults in work rose to 65.3 per cent in 2009, from 59.5 per cent in 1989, while the proportion of workless households has also risen from 13.8 per cent to 17.3 per cent over the same period (Gregg and Wadsworth 2009).

The 'polarisation of parenthood', around the age of partnering and parenting, is driving a new dimension of inequality. Women who marry (or cohabit) and have children earlier tend to leave education at a younger age and face a greater earnings penalty from motherhood than those who start families later (Cabinet Office/DCSF 2008). This divide is compounded by 'assortative mating', where people partner with those of a similar education level or income bracket (Blandon 2004). These are major trends taking place underneath the ongoing decline of the nuclear family and the rise of less traditional family forms.

This means that shared challenges are experienced in different ways by women at various points on the social and economic scale. Occupational segregation, low status 'female' work, and the gender pay gap persist, especially affecting those with low levels of education (Manning and Petrongolo 2008). The polarisation between the 'work-rich' (dual earner) and 'work-poor' (workless) (Berthoud 2007) means there are now only 17.4 per cent of households with a mixture of working and non-working adults, compared to 26.4 per cent in 1989 (Gregg and Wadsworth 2009). Women now work an average of 42 hours a week, up from 37 in the late 1980s, but the average male working week is unchanged at 44 hours (Social Trends). Men's roles in work and family life have not changed anywhere near as much as women's.

The result is that many families are facing a 'care crunch', forcing them to make major trade-offs between money and time. For some, extended families are a vital source of childcare support, but for others the pressures of caring for elderly relatives means an additional responsibility. As Esping-Andersen has argued, the revolution in women's lives remains incomplete (Esping-Andersen 2009). This makes childcare and social care increasingly pivotal to advancing equality, meeting the pressures of ageing and raising the employment rate (and therefore broadening the tax base). There are also dilemmas about the role of men and masculinity today, as old family and workplace cultures fall away (Rutherford 2011).

**4. The expansion of higher education is raising the qualifications of those entering work and increasing the proportion of graduates in society. However, there remains a core without qualifications, including low-skilled (largely male) youth.**

*In the mid-1990s, the number of new graduates was increasing, but many people lacked qualifications and the vast majority of the adult population had not been to university. Youth unemployment had risen significantly following the early 90s recession.*

- Over a third (36 per cent) of 18- and 19-year-olds now enter higher education (HEFCE 2011), a proportion that has risen dramatically since the early 1990s expansion of the university sector. Participation among 18- to 30-year-olds is now 45 per cent (BIS 2011).
- Higher entry rates take time to feed through into the adult population, though the proportion with a degree equivalent qualification has reached 31 per cent; up from 21 per cent in 1994 and projected to reach 41 per cent by 2020 (UKCES 2010, Leitch 2006).
- The proportion of adults without any qualification has fallen from 22 per cent to 12 per cent between 1994 and 2008, though the economic penalty for being low skilled is greater than in the past (UKCES 2010, Leitch 2006).
- Graduate unemployment is currently high, though the employment rate of those without qualifications is structurally much lower (Leitch 2006). There are 162,000 16- to 18-year-olds and 938,000 16- to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (DfE 2011).

Whatever the effect of the government's higher education reforms on the rate of university participation, the trends towards a rapidly rising graduate share of the adult population will remain. The performance of the labour market – and specific firms and sectors – will affect how far this raises national growth and individual's living standards. But it will undoubtedly alter the composition of the electorate, with the proportion of graduates set to virtually double between the mid-1990s and the end of this decade. The long-standing assumption has been that an increasingly graduate population leads to a more liberal electorate (Inglehart 1989), though not necessarily more left- or right-wing. However, as its share expands, the difference between graduates and the electorate as a whole may become less distinct.

Though declining in number, the political impact of those with no qualifications or low skill levels could become sharper in the years ahead. The employment and wage prospects of this group are less certain than in previous decades, relative to more skilled workers. The routes to a good job with prospects – and the respect of others and self-esteem

that come with it – are more in doubt than in the past, especially for men<sup>14</sup>. This leaves a major economic and social challenge, with roots in the industrial change and more intense competition for labour. It also speaks to the political alienation (and sometimes anger) amongst a core part of Labour's traditional electoral coalition, which is increasingly opting out of formal democracy altogether or becoming attracted to extreme politics (whether the British National Party or the English Defence League).

### **5. The higher flow of migrants coming to visit or settle in Britain and leaving to go abroad is contributing to greater ethnic and cultural diversity and a more fluid population.**

*In the mid-1990s, migration flows were lower, the population was more stable and ethnic and cultural diversity largely reflected the legacy of post-War immigration.*

- Both immigration and emigration have risen sharply since the mid-1980s. Between 1984 and 1988 the annual average inflow was 222,000 and outflow was 200,000. In 2007/08, the equivalent figures were 554,000 and 371,000 (Social Trends).
- However, between 2008 and 2011 net natural change added 221,000 people a year on average to the population (largely due to 90,000 fewer deaths a year now than in 1987/88), compared to 184,000 from net migration (Social Trends).
- The population of the UK has grown by 4.3 million over the last 20 years, reaching 61.4 million in 2008. In 1988 national statisticians projected that the population would not reach 61.1 million until 2026; now they think it will be 69 million by that year.
- Annual average population growth for the years 2008-2011 is expected to be three times higher than in 1987/88 (419,000 compared to 135,000) – driven more by net natural change than higher migration (Social Trends).
- The proportion of the population that is 'non-White British' rose to 16.7 per cent in 2009 from 12.7 per cent in 2001, an additional 2.5 million people (ONS 2011b). However this group is now characterised by considerable diversity itself (Kyambi 2005).
- Tentative estimates suggest that the ethnic minority share of population might rise to over 20 per cent by 2031 (see Painter 2011), partly due to the immigration of women of childbearing age and the higher fertility rate of non-UK-born women (ONS 2010a).

Future migration flows are sensitive to both border controls and economic conditions, with the current government seeking to reduce net inward migration to 'the tens of thousands'. However, from a purely empirical perspective, the movement of people in and out of the country will continue – and the ethnic and cultural diversity it brings is here to stay. Higher immigration is now cited by large proportions of voters as one of the top issues facing the country. The widely held view that there has been too much immigration to Britain in recent years is rooted in concerns about economic insecurity and cultural anxiety (Lowles and Painter 2011).

This risks opening up a deep fracture for the centre-left. On the one hand is a desire to defend the liberal, multicultural and cosmopolitan values, which were at the heart of the

<sup>14</sup> Especially in light of certain trends suggesting the 'feminisation of work', in relation to the types of occupational groups set to expand and the types of capabilities increasingly desired and rewarded across the labour market.

modernisation era (Legrain 2009). On the other, is an acknowledgment of the unequal benefits and burdens of immigration alongside the destabilising effects of rapid population change on settled ways of life and established sources of identity (Kenny 2011). This is a dilemma faced by social democratic parties across Europe, where the cultural and economic challenges posed by immigration lie on the fault line of their traditional electoral coalitions. This is compounded by the threat of far-right nationalist and popular anti-immigration sentiment.

As the ethnic minority share of the population increases, its electoral significance will grow, especially with evidence of its de-concentration geographically (Painter 2011). However, the greater diversity between different ethnic minority groups mean they won't necessarily have a shared political identity or set of interests. Labour has traditionally received strong support among ethnic minorities, receiving 58 per cent of their vote in 2005 (Painter 2011). However, the political values and allegiances of newer arrivals are less clear. For instance, it might be the case that the growing number of Muslim voters and those coming from the predominantly Catholic east of Europe could be more conservative.

**6. Older people are the fastest growing demographic group, divided between 'affluent actives' and those struggling with poor health and low incomes. The number of under-25s is set to decline, offset by recent rises in the birth rate.**

*In the mid-1990s, ageing was not a major demographic trend, while poverty was the dominant pensioner issue. A bulge in 'family formers' as the baby boomers hit their 30s and 40s was the defining population trend.*

- The number of over-65s rose from 9.1 million in 1991 to 10.5 million in 2011. Over the same period the number of under-16s was virtually flat, at 11.6 million. There are half a million fewer 25- to 34-year-olds now compared to two decades ago (Social Trends).
- This ageing trend is set to intensify, with the over-65s rising from 16 per cent of the population in 1991 to 21 per cent by 2026. This includes the number of over-75s almost doubling over that period, from just under 4 million to over 7.5 million (Social Trends).
- The economic activity rate of women aged over 60 more than doubled between 1988 and 2009, up from 7 per cent to 16 per cent. Over the same period, it rose from 53 per cent to 67 per cent among women aged 55 to 59 year olds. The economic activity rate of older men has stabilised, reversing the trend of the 1980s (Social Trends).
- The proportion of households comprising a couple with dependent children has fallen from 41 per cent in 1991 to 36 per cent in 2009; equating to 2 million more childless couple households – as people live longer or delay parenting (Social Trends).
- After gradual falls in the 1990s, the birth rate has risen sharply since around the turn of the century. The fertility rate is currently at its highest since 1973, with the most significant increase among women in their 30s .

Ageing is probably the most well documented trend in modern Britain, though this was not predicted in the late 1980s (Social Trends). The gap in life expectancy by social class is just one aspect of the increasingly diverse experiences of the expanding group of over-65s. As the baby boomers hit retirement, many older people enjoy good health, active

lifestyles, varied social connections and financial security. Others, especially the ‘older old’, live with deteriorating health or chronic conditions, few meaningful relationships and real financial pressures. Old age is increasingly divided between those for whom it is a period of independence – as children leave home and work recedes<sup>15</sup> – and those for whom it is characterised by dependence – either on family or health and social care services.

The fiscal pressures of an ageing society have been widely discussed, with rising longevity putting issues like pensions and social care centre stage. However, a rising generation of healthy and active older people provides opportunities too. More people aged over 50 and 60 continuing to work – and the broader ‘end of retirement’ phenomenon – helps to maintain the employment rate as young people stay in education longer. Older relatives provide vital help with childcare for younger families.

Over a third (36 per cent) of the adult population will be 55 or older by 2016 (Social Trends). That political power is further strengthened by the higher relative turnout among older voters: 76 per cent among over-65s compared to 65 per cent overall at the last election (Painter 2011). However, the political class continues to lump together older people as ‘pensioners’ and reduce their concerns to traditional issues like pensions, social care and inheritance. There will be a huge premium for the party that responds to the different experiences and aspirations of this diverse group; especially the ‘affluent actives’ who least conform to the ‘pensioner’ caricature.

Older voters have traditionally been most likely to support the Conservative party, with the Tories leading Labour among over-55s in every election since 1974, except for 1997 (Painter 2011). However, the values of this group are changing – not least as the more liberal baby boomers retire – and will become increasingly heterogeneous. The growing number of households, without dependent children is also an important constituency of voters that politicians have not spoken to before; with the dominant focus on families with young children. This group includes people living alone and older couples whose children have left home, but also those delaying parenthood or deciding not to have children.

### **7. The rise in homeownership has slowed, including a big decline among under-30s. The number of people privately renting has grown substantially, while levels of social housing have stabilised but become further residualised.**

*In the mid-1990s, homeownership was continuing to expand rapidly, while social housing was contracting and private renting remained largely a niche sub-market.*

- The share of households who own their own home has been falling since 2005. After rising steeply from 57 per cent to 68 per cent between 1981 and 1991, rates stabilised at around 70 per cent before falling back to 68 per cent in 2008
- The share of privately rented households was flat during the 1980s and 1990s, at around 10 per cent. However, rates have been rising since 2000, reaching 14 per cent in 2008; equivalent to almost a million extra households.
- After falling rapidly during the 1980s, the proportion of socially rented households has continued to drop, though much less dramatically, to just 18 per cent in 2008 (including a shift from council to housing association landlords).

<sup>15</sup> Or work becomes more an active and welcome choice.

- The proportion of people under 30 owning their home fell from 43 per cent in 1997 to 29 per cent in 2009. In 2008, just 18 per cent of first-time buyers were under 25 compared to 30 per cent in 1990 (Social Trends).
- The aspiration to homeownership among the under-25s was below 50 per cent in 2007, down from almost 80 per cent in the early 1990s. Surveys suggest a further drop in recent years, matched by a decline among 25 to 34 year olds (Wallace 2010).

Homeownership rates in Britain remain well above those in France (55 per cent) and Germany (41 per cent), but are lower or comparable to other major OECD countries: Spain 83 per cent, Australia 70 per cent, USA 69 per cent, Italy 68 per cent (Andrews and Sanchez 2011). The dramatic tenure shifts of the 1980s have stopped and there are reasons to think that rates of homeownership will not accelerate as they have in the past. This is partly being driven by changing aspirations, especially among the young who are studying longer and starting families later<sup>16</sup>. However there are also structural factors in the housing market, putting homeownership out of reach for many people.

The most significant is supply constraint. There were 5.1 million more households in 2009 than in 1991, but the number of dwellings rose by only 2.7 million during that period (Social Trends). There is a particular new pressure on family homes given that in 2008/09 half of all new building completions were flats and half were houses, compared to 1991/92 when nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) were houses and only just over a quarter (26 per cent) were flats (Social Trends). In addition, rises in house prices have substantially outstripped wage growth over a long period, while access to mortgage finance has become tighter and deposit requirements higher since the onset of the financial crisis.

These factors mean it is likely that renting will play an increasingly significant role in providing people with homes, including becoming a longer-term housing option for more people. This requires a new focus on improving the quality of private rented accommodation and providing steps towards affordable homeownership for 'generation rent' (Alakeson 2011). Social housing has become more residualised, with the proportion of tenants in employment dropping from 47 per cent to 32 per cent between 1981 and 2006 (Hills 2007). This is partly because the composition of tenants has changed, including more over-65s, while the number of properties has not significantly risen. That leaves contentious questions about the allocation of public housing and the nature of mixed communities.

The electoral implications of these trends are up for grabs<sup>17</sup>. At the last election, the Conservatives had clear leads over Labour among those owning their home outright (by 45 per cent to 24 per cent) and those with a mortgage (by 36 per cent to 29 per cent). Labour led strongly among social renters (by 47 per cent to 24 per cent) but trailed among private renters (by 35 per cent to 29 per cent)<sup>18</sup>. The Liberal Democrats performed best among this latter group, picking up 27 per cent, partly due to the younger age profile of this group. Significantly, turnout among homeowners was much higher (74 per cent for those owning outright and 66 per cent for those with a mortgage) than among renters (55 per cent for both social and private tenants)<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Homeownership remains the aspiration for over 70 per cent of all groups over the age of 25 (Wallace 2011).

<sup>17</sup> The shift from social renting to homeownership was an important part of the electoral advantage entrenched by the Conservatives during the Thatcher years.

<sup>18</sup> However, the biggest decline in Labour's vote share since 2005 was among social renters (down 8 per cent).

<sup>19</sup> Ipsos MORI – How Britain Voted in 2010:

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2613>

## 8. Mental illness and chronic conditions are increasingly the main drivers of poor health and disability, while 'lifestyle' related health problems have risen significantly.

*In the mid-1990s, physical disability was the major driver of long-term economic inactivity, especially among older men, linked to the ongoing consequences of deindustrialisation.*

- Many more people are living longer with chronic conditions, with 750,000 people now living with dementia in the UK; expected to rise to a million by 2021
- Around 18 per cent of people report suffering from a mental disorder, up from 15 per cent in 1993, with anxiety and depression the most common (NHS Confed 2009).
- Nearly four times as many anti-depressant prescriptions were dispensed in 2007 than in 1991, up from 9 to 34 million (Social Trends).
- In 2008, 63.4 per cent of the population was overweight, down from 54.1 per cent in 1994 (driven by increases obesity and morbid obesity). Older people are far more likely to be overweight, though rates among children have also risen (Social Trends).
- In 2008, there were 9,031 alcohol-related deaths in the UK, more than double the number in 1991, at 4,144. The greatest rise was among 55- to 74-year-olds. Deaths from drugs rose by 19 per cent over this period, from 1,457 to 1,738 (Social Trends).
- The number of new diagnoses for sexually transmitted diseases rose by 76 per cent between 1998 and 2008, up from 150,000 to 264,000 (Social Trends).
- The proportion of people smoking regularly is down from 30 per cent among men and 26 per cent among women in 1998 to 22 and 21 per cent respectively in 2008 (Social Trends).

The rise of mental disorders, chronic conditions and lifestyle-related health problems marks a major shift both in many people's life experience and the nature of the health challenges facing society. This particularly concerns older people, but children and young people are increasingly affected too. The NHS is already adapting to a much greater incidence of ongoing and fluctuating conditions, while public health is now arguably more significant than at any time since the clearing of the Victorian slums. These trends also speak to broader experiences of isolation, powerlessness and disappointment faced by some people in society. Captured in the French sociologist Émile Durkheim's notion of 'anomie' (Durkheim 2002 [1897]), these difficulties cannot be entirely overcome by state action or public policy, given the important dimensions of personal resilience and human relationships which affect them.

Over two-fifths (43 per cent) of those in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance (and Incapacity Benefit) are doing so because of a mental health condition<sup>20</sup>. Those on disability benefits are no longer overwhelmingly those with a physical condition left behind by industrial restructuring and the 1980s recession. Enabling people with health issues – physical or mental – to succeed at work and live independently is vital in promoting equality. But it is also essential to achieving a high employment rate and being able to meet rising healthcare costs. Politically, people living with a physical disability, a mental health disorder or a chronic condition are an increasingly large voter group – across all age groups and social classes.

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<sup>20</sup> Author's analysis using the DWP Tabulation Tool.

**9. Voting behaviour is more volatile as loyalty to political parties declines. But while formal democratic involvement is more fragile, other forms of civic and political participation are holding up and finding new avenues of expression.**

*In the mid-1990s, rapid falls in membership of political parties and trade unions were combined with further de-alignment between social class and voting patterns. This led to Labour's traditional electoral base becoming both smaller and less reliable.*

- Turnout at the last three elections has been well below 70 per cent, in contrast to every previous post-war contest. Combined membership of the main political parties halved between 1997 and 2008, from around 800,000 to around 400,000 (NCVO 2011).
- Support for the main two parties has continued its long-term decline, from 76 per cent in 1992 to 65 per cent in 2010. Just a fifth claim to have a 'very strong' attachment to a particular party, down from half in the 1960s (Lodge and Gottfried 2011).
- Trade union membership has stabilised, dropping only slightly from 7.8 to 7.6 million between 1999 and 2009; but down from 13.2 million in 1979 (Bryson and Forth 2011).
- The proportion of people who are members of a social, political, religious or sports organisation fell only slightly from 58 to 53 per cent in the decade to 2007. The National Trust has 3.6 million members, whose weight is being mobilised over reform of the planning laws. (NCVO 2011).
- Over a third of people (34 per cent) engage in some form of civic participation each year, like contacting an MP or signing a petition, down only slightly since 2000. Levels of volunteering have remained broadly stable over the last three decades (NCVO 2011).

Political promiscuity has intensified the challenge of constructing enduring electoral majorities. Previous IPPR analysis has found that nearly a third (31 per cent) of those who voted in the 2005 election supported a different party in 2010. Two-fifths (40 per cent) only made their mind up about who to vote for during the campaign itself. And recent polling found that under a fifth (18 per cent) agreed with the statement that 'one political party comes close to reflecting my views and values; I am strongly opposed to all of the others' (Lodge and Gottfried 2011).

Non-tribal 'swing voters' – those whose support is up for grabs – are not a niche group but a substantial electoral majority. Only five per cent of people have taken an active part in a political campaign over the last two or three years and a similar proportion have donated money or paid a membership fee to a political party (Hansard Society 2010). However, these trends do not seem to mark a fundamental turning away from democratic politics. Many forms of political participation – like community organising, online activism and single-issue campaigns – have flourished in recent years (Hemming 2011). It is just that the party system is no longer the only, or even the main, vehicle for doing politics. Following a year of large street protests, student demonstrations and public sector strikes, it is hard to argue that Britain has become de-politicised <sup>21</sup>.

21 The lesson is perhaps that, for most people, political participation depends on whether they care enough about the issue at hand and whether they think their participation is capable of making a difference.

In attempting to understand these forces, the French political philosopher Pierre Rosanvallon has argued that formal democratic structures are increasingly under pressure from outside the system. This 'other democracy' takes the form of: popular oversight of elected representative (for example, through transparency and monitoring); the capacity of citizens to mobilise against the actions of elected governments (for example, through protests or actions); and an assertive judiciary able to check elected authorities (through constitutional or other legal powers) (Rosanvallon 2008). The question is whether these 'other democratic' forces are competing with and undermining formal democracy, or complementing and strengthening it. So far, political parties and formal democratic structures, like parliament, are struggling to keep up.

There is also a major challenge of political inequality to confront. Only a quarter (27 per cent) of 18- to 24-year-olds and under two-fifths (39 per cent) of those in the lowest social class, DE, say they would be certain to vote in an immediate general election. This compares to four-fifths (80 per cent) of those aged 75 or over and almost seven in ten (69 per cent) of those in the highest social class, AB. There is a similarly large social class gradient in most forms of civic engagement and political participation (Hansard Society 2010).

#### **10. The rapid spread of the internet, digital technology and social media is changing the way people consume, spend time and relate to one another, while providing new avenues for political engagement and expression.**

*In the mid-1990s, mobile phones and information technology had not yet penetrated the mass market, while rising household spending on consumer goods and private leisure activities were seen as indicating people's declining involvement in politics.*

- In the decade to 2010, the proportion of homes with internet connection rose from 25 to 76 per cent; mobile phone ownership grew from 36 to 91 per cent; while the share of households with multi-channel TV rose from 36 to 93 per cent (Ofcom 2011).
- Facebook now has 750 million users worldwide, 1 billion tweets are sent each week and 128 billion text messages were sent in 2010, up from 7 billion in 2000 (Ofcom 2010).
- Three-quarters of 16 to 24-year-olds have posted messages on social network sites and half have uploaded self-created content. Sixty-two per cent of people have bought goods or services online (ONS 2010).
- Regular readership of national newspapers fell from 63 per cent in 1991 to 42 per cent in 2009 (Social Trends), but TV viewing is up over the last decade (Ofcom 2011).
- The average number of car journeys per person fell from 425 in 1997 to 410 in 2007, while rail journeys rose from an average of 19 to 27 per person per year. International air travel has risen by almost 40 per cent in the last two decades (Social Trends).

The penetration of new technology into the everyday lives of the vast majority of the population is one of the most dramatic shifts of the last two decades<sup>22</sup>. When Labour was elected in 1997, the internet and mobile phones were niche products, while Facebook and Twitter were years off being invented. Broadband access and smart phones are changing

<sup>22</sup> Including in the economic and business worlds (Lent and Lockwood 2010).

the way people communicate and consume, breaking down geographic barriers and making it easier to form 'communities of interest' not bound by geography. While younger people are leading this change, use of new technology among older people is rising rapidly as well<sup>23</sup>. Because these advances are being driven by citizens, consumers and businesses – not a central authority – it is almost impossible to predict their future shape and direction. But, while these technologies are not going away, their impact on politics is still unfolding<sup>24</sup>.

In the 1980s, the expansion of private leisure and consumption was seen as a force reducing people's interest and engagement in politics. Now, the growth in new technology is (partly) being used as a channel for political debate, organisation and activism; quite distinct from the culture of public meetings that were the staple of 20th century politics. The online campaign group, 38 Degrees, now has over half a million members, contributing to successful campaigns against the sell-off of the forests and reforms to the NHS. The downfall of the News of the World was significantly accelerated by the campaign to pull advertising revenue from the paper, which was overwhelmingly spread online. The internet and social media make it far easier (and cheaper) for political interests and ideas to be quickly communicated to large numbers of people. This is a powerful democratising force, outside the control of the market or the state. Though, as the summer riots showed, these can be used to destroy and divide, as well as create and unite.

What is less clear is whether the internet and social media are increasing the number of people engaged in politics, or providing new avenues of participation for those already active<sup>25</sup>. Even online, politics remains a minority sport: only four per cent of people follow a political group or politician on Facebook, two per cent on Twitter (Hansard Society 2010). Social media undoubtedly changed the character of the 2010 election, with online campaigning playing a bigger role than ever (Painter 2010). However, it was still traditional forms of media and communication that were decisive: newspapers, direct mail, face-to-face canvassing and the televised leaders' debates. Perhaps this is inevitable given the relatively young nature of much of this technology. Since the election, the internet and social media have been integral to all the recent examples of light being shone on the activities of powerful elites, whether politicians or media tycoons.

The challenge for politics is to harness the new energies emerging from technological advances – to help people communicate and build relationships with each other – while avoiding its pitfalls. Fundamentally, technology is a platform for politics, not an end in itself. The chaotic and networked nature of the internet can make it hard to filter the urgent and important from what is newest and loudest. It bolsters democracy where it fosters deliberation and transparency, not belligerence and hysteria. Political parties must learn to live with this new expression of pluralism and dissent, without seeking to control it. They should not and they can not. This poses major cultural challenges for political parties that have historically sought to subsume social movement and single-issue campaigns within their bureaucratic reach.

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23 The fastest growing group of Facebook users in the UK are males aged between 45 and 54: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/pda/2011/aug/10/facebook-losing-users>

24 For a flavour of the academic research in this area see Judy Wajcman's work at the LSE on the sociology of technology.

25 Or whether any increase in participation is broad rather than deep. For example, the term 'slacktivist' has been coined to refer to people who engage in acts of political engagement on-line that require little effort and make minimal difference: <http://bottomlineideas.wordpress.com/2011/02/21/im-a-serial-slacktivist-and-proud/>

### *Cultural values*

In addition to the sociological shifts analysed above, cultural values are also a vital source of political energy in society. These are the attachments and motivations that shape how people see themselves, relate to others and view the world around them. Unlike opinions and attitudes, values are more deeply held and less subject to fluctuations in light of shifting external events. They affect people's taste and behaviour in all domains of life, from their relationships and ethical code, to what they buy in the shops – and how they think about and engage with politics. Investigating values is, therefore, an essential part of understanding the mood of the electorate and constructing a majoritarian project; quite distinct from exploring public attitudes, which can only indicate whether people are likely to support a given action or policy position.

A subsequent IPPR report will be devoted specifically to addressing this issue in detail, with new insights into the relationship between values, class and voting, based on original analysis of the British Values Survey. It will shed light on the importance of synthesising economic and cultural, or material and subjective, dimensions of analysis. For this reason, values are not dealt with in-depth here. However, given that questions of culture and identity are vital building blocks of political sociology, a quick overview is necessary here.

### **11. Society has become more tolerant and liberal, such as the desire for autonomy and individuality. But this has come alongside resilience in aspects of culturally conservative sentiment, like the importance of recognition and roots.**

*In the mid-1990s, society was becoming more liberal and less deferential, while rising education and affluence was expected to advance 'post-material' values, at the expense of traditional cultural practices, attachments and identities.*

On many dimensions, society is becoming more tolerant and more liberal, especially on issues of equal treatment and personal choice, like racial equality, gay rights, sexual conduct and family form <sup>26</sup>. Despite widespread anxiety about immigration, Britain enjoys remarkably good community relations for such a diverse society. People are, in the main, less deferential to authority and less judgmental of how others live than two or three decades ago. Indeed, the desire for autonomy, choice and individuality is characteristic of modern, advanced societies like Britain (Inglehart 1989). This does not mean, though, that there has been an uninterrupted advance of rational, liberal, or universalist values across the population.

In fact, there are important ways in which Inglehart's analysis of advancing 'post-materialism' tells only a partial story about patterns of culture and identity in contemporary British society <sup>27</sup>. Tradition has not everywhere been overthrown or rejected as anachronistic, while enduring attachments to place and identity have not all been discarded in the global melting pot. There is often strong resistance to attempts to 'flatten out' or rationalise the quirks and messiness of inherited forms of behaviour or ways of life. These can embody ideas and practices that violate widely shared liberal principles, like non-discrimination, but far from all. Similarly, identities are not all free floating and freely chosen, but often reflect historic and shared attachments. This can be seen in

<sup>26</sup> These trends are well documented in the annual British Social Attitudes series: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/series/british-social-attitudes/25-years-of-bsa>

<sup>27</sup> For two of the best recent attempts to unpick this story, see Lowles and Painter 2011 and Muir and Rogers 2008.

the resilience of identities linked to particular groups and places, and the resurgence of Englishness and a distinctive English identity (Kenny and Lodge 2009).

Values such as these are often portrayed as simply reflecting a streak of populist 'authoritarianism', which need to be either challenged or, if necessary, appeased through non-liberal positions on issues like welfare and crime. However this is to caricature aspects of enduring conservative sentiment, which are also visible in the value placed on personal responsibility, the family and particular institutions or places that embody enduring meaning. Similarly, national identity and patriotism remain powerful popular attachments, despite being seen as almost irrational to cosmopolitans (Lowles and Painter 2011). And though organised religion continues to decline, one in five people still go to church or other places of worship at least once a month (Social Trends). However expressions of cultural identity and everyday practice such as these often clash with the modernity that has dominated mainstream politics, especially on the centre-left, for at least two decades.

That clash of values exposes a disconnection that exists between the political (and cultural) elite and parts of mainstream society. At its most serious, it feeds democratic alienation and political extremism. It also underpins dilemmas around issues like immigration, which (at least in part) speak to anxieties about culture and identity which cannot be understood through the lens of economic and material concerns alone (Lowles and Painter 2011). In some countries in Europe these dilemmas are being refracted through the challenges posed by increasingly large Muslim populations. These pose major challenges for social democratic parties across Europe – not least in holding on to liberal principles while caring about economic, social and cultural segregation – especially given that the fractures lie on their ideological and electoral fault lines.

However, while this makes the task of constructing a majoritarian coalition more complex, this insight also provides opportunities to reach into those aspects of conservative sentiment that can provide political resources for the centre-left. This is the terrain on which 'Blue Labour' grabbed attention and provoked a vital debate; though in the process demonstrating just how difficult these issues are (Glasman et al 2011). From a similar though distinct perspective, Mike Kenny has argued that the centre-left must nurture a politics which responds to claims for recognition and the importance of roots, as well as traditional ideas of redistribution (Kenny 2011). For example, recognition for people's desire for self-fulfillment, autonomy and individuality, as well as for particular identities and cultural practices to be respected, could provide one basis for an alliance of popular sentiment that ranges across the rather circular and unproductive 'liberal/communitarian' divide.

#### 4.4 Conclusion: grasping the new sources of political energy

Two decades ago, an understanding of political sociology – embodied in the modernisation era thesis – contributed to the centre-left's decade-long political domination. It provided a shared political narrative and underpinned a fresh ideological orientation. However, since then, as this section has shown, this perspective on British society and its electorate has been undermined by theoretical critiques, overtaken by decisive events and reshaped by economic, social and cultural forces. In short, the political sociology of Britain has changed.

The sociological shifts described above generate new sources of energy and frame the context for contemporary politics. They provide the political resources, but their use and expression is not determined. For example, while the economic, social and cultural shifts of the 1980s and 1990s were real, the way they were interpreted, shaped and responded to by the centre-left at the time was the result of deliberate choices (not exogenous forces). Similarly, the new sources of energy in politics today are not determined but up for grabs, posing both challenges and opportunities for the left and right.

The new political sociology establishes the conditions to which ideological agendas must respond and in which coalitions of popular support can be built. But there is a contest for which political movement or tradition is best able to advance its goals and put down enduring roots in this new context. The most successful will show *leadership*, in offering the most compelling account of the current moment and the political response it requires, and *action*, in mobilising agency, alliances, ideas and interests in support of it.

The final section of this paper seeks to pick up this challenge – in order to lay the foundations for a transformative centre-left project.

## 5. THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A TRANSFORMATIVE CENTRE-LEFT POLITICS

The new sources of energy in society, emerging from the new political sociology, are available to all political parties and traditions. The question is which can grasp and shape them. So, having identified and analysed some of the dominant trends shaping politics today, this final chapter explores the ideological and electoral tasks facing the centre-left in seeking to master this new context. In light of these tasks, it goes on to consider what might be the core elements of a transformative centre-left project for the present era.

Any such project must recognise, of course, the often decisive role played by contingent events and human agency in shaping the direction of politics. However, the focus here is on the impact of deeper, underlying factors. The framework for thinking about these questions returns to where this paper started, with the necessary conditions for a transformative political project:

- Understanding the new sources of energy in politics, which emerge from the political sociology of contemporary society
- Harnessing those energies to advance an ideological agenda that responds to the condition of the country and is capable of being sustained
- Building a majoritarian appeal that puts down enduring popular roots and engages interests and alliances in support of its agenda
- Pursuing a patriotic politics, framed around the national interest, that is in tune with the mood of the moment and captures the spirit of the times

Two decades ago, New Labour captured the optimism and affluence of the post-cold war era and used it to build a project of national modernisation with majoritarian appeal. Orientated around the modernisation era, it dominated British politics for well over a decade – and its legacy continues to influence politics. This approach broadened Labour's support and advanced lasting change in important areas: rescuing public services, reducing poverty, reforming the constitution and advancing social liberalism.

However, it is less clear that New Labour was more broadly transformative – economically, socially or culturally. Over time, its ideological project ossified and its electoral appeal frayed, as the modernisation era became overtaken by history. The financial crisis exposed the weakness of its political economy; the deficit questioned its model for advancing social justice; the loss of trust in government revealed the limits of its statecraft; and the alienation of sections of the public from politics shone a light on its 'tin ear' to important aspects of cultural sentiment.

The result has been a fracturing of Labour's electoral coalition, a loss of intellectual confidence, and a crisis of political identity. Current opinion poll leads owe much to anger and dissatisfaction with the current government. The electoral, economic, governing and cultural dilemmas facing the centre-left in Britain today – outlined earlier and shared by social democratic parties across Europe – are real and profound. And they won't be solved by better theory or more sophistication polling alone.

In thinking about how these challenges might be addressed, Peter Kellner, the President of YouGov, offers a neat analogy (Kellner 2010). In the post-war era, he argues, Labour's 'product' was full employment and a strong welfare state and its 'consumer' was the working class, who then comprised a large majority of the electorate. In light of the limits of old-style social democracy and class change, New Labour re-invented the product as

'what matters is what works', offered by a party that was 'the political wing of the British people'. Though something of a caricature, this captures both the real strengths and ultimate vulnerability of New Labour. What, Kellner asks, is Labour's political product and its target consumer group now?

Will Davies, Research Fellow at the Saïd Business School in Oxford, poses the challenge slightly differently. Instead of searching for answers in moral judgment or party tradition, he suggests that the centre-left should update its historic role as a force for addressing sociologically driven problems which cannot be solved by markets or individuals alone. He argues that :

'Social history – or rather, capitalist society – will throw up ever new collective threats that capitalism itself will struggle to solve. 19th century 'Manchester liberalism' produced the extreme negative externalities of degrading factory conditions, corrosion of family life and disease. This was publicly expressed, measurable and it demanded a collective response, which it received in the birth of the labour movement.

'20th century Fordism collectivised and rationalised the economy, but left individual risks – unemployment, ill-health, old age - as negative externalities. With the birth of national statistics and national media, these had become publicly expressed, measurable and they demanded a collective response, which they received with the post-45 political settlement.

'So the question is, what might be the equivalents today, that are not only technical problems in need of a technocratic solution, but defining shortcomings of contemporary capitalism?' <sup>28</sup>

While this analysis can be criticised for being somewhat 'unpolitical', Davies is surely right to say that mental ill health and loneliness, energy scarcity and housing market failures fit this category and demand a response. More broadly, he asks: if the Third Way was the 1990s response to the 1960s 'baby boomers' generation – through a mix of social and economic liberalism – what are the forces that emerged in the 1980s generation which the centre-left needs to grasp so as to capture the next decade?

The aim here is not to respond directly to the challenges posed by Kellner and Davies, but to consider a broader question: in light of the new political sociology of Britain, what are the core ideological and electoral foundations of a transformative centre-left project?

### 5.1 Ideological and electoral implications of the new political sociology

One reading of the history of the centre-left is as a battle between ideological purity and electoral necessity; or idealism versus realism. These are often presented as opposite ends of a spectrum, to be traded off against each other. The real challenge, though, is to hold them in productive tension. This speaks to the democratic paradox: overcoming the elitist belief that people do not know what is good for them and the populist instinct to chase and satisfy their preferences. Genuine democratic politics is about contesting circumstances, not just accepting them – and enabling people to control their own destiny, not leaving it to those who presume to know best.

Similarly, it is only when ideological and electoral imperatives are held in paradoxical tension – so that one reinforces the other – that politics is transformational. It is a cliché to

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28 [http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2010/05/what\\_future\\_for\\_the\\_left.html](http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2010/05/what_future_for_the_left.html)

say that ideology without action is fruitless while power without purpose is pointless. But the crucial insight here is that political sociology can bridge the gap. It is the sources of energy in society that provide the context *to* which ideology must respond and *in* which electoral roots must be put down. At its most powerful, an ideology entrenches popular and institutional support which, in turn, become agents for its advancement. The NHS is a potent example of this, though so is financial deregulation.

This paper is not a statement of ideological principle. In fact, it is partly an argument that the centre-left should root its politics less in ‘what it believes’ and more in the pressing challenges for the country and ordinary people to which it needs to be the answer. However, identifying those challenges is clearly not a neutral task, so something must be said about the orientation that informs the perspective that follows.

At a very basic level, centre-left politics should be about ensuring people have power over their lives, security against risks they can not control and a community they feel they belong to. This requires:

- an economy that provides good jobs and rising living standards for those on low and middle incomes
- a public sphere that offers those goods and protections that the private market and the majority of individuals can’t provide on their own
- a society where individuality and interdependence go hand in hand and democracy acts to spread power and hold it to account.

This means caring about the process of politics as well as its outcome, and harnessing the agency of people and reform, as well as the state and spending.

The broader political goal for the centre-left should be to construct (and sustain) a coalition in the country that not only provides support at the ballot box but is a partner in political change. This means separating out the necessary task of voter targeting at election time from the broader objective of building a majoritarian political project, with deep roots across the country. The latter means speaking to the national interest, not sectional interests, and forging alliances between groups of people, not a patchwork of sub-groups. The drift towards seeking to disaggregate voters into tightly defined demographic niches can be a helpful tactic at election time, but if it becomes the basis for political strategy it encourages ‘micro-policies’ for specific voter groups and undermines governing coherence.

To shed light on how these goals might be furthered in this particular era, the table below draws out the ideological tasks and electoral landscape that arise from the new political sociology of Britain (organised around the major shifts identified in the previous chapter). This adds up to a very different context from the mid-1990s, demonstrating the needs for a distinct political project.

What follows is not a comprehensive governing agenda; indeed certain core policy areas like Britain’s place in the world and criminal justice, are largely absent. It merely tries to shed light on where the centre-left should be looking to make ideological and electoral advances over the coming years.

However, in other areas, success has been more patchy and fragile; and in some cases significantly reversed.

**1. The labour market is ‘polarising’ with growth in professional and managerial occupations as well as in lower-level service sector employment, alongside a ‘hollowing out’ of mid-skill manual and administrative jobs.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To pursue full employment, including raising the employment rate of groups who currently have low labour market participation.</li> <li>• To offer realistic routes to career advancement and social mobility, in the absence of dramatic occupational change.</li> <li>• To ensure that just because the economy will remain heavily dominated does not mean accepting a worsening quality of employment.</li> <li>• To develop high-quality services, by expanding exports and raising domestic demand (in jobs dependent on people skills of all kinds).</li> <li>• To retain manufacturing in those high-value sectors where Britain can exploit a comparative advantage and create well-paid jobs.</li> <li>• To take economic advantage of the rising demand for public services, both domestically and internationally.</li> <li>• To address the long tail of low paid, low value jobs, overwhelmingly in the service sector, that are not going to be outsourced or automated</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The key alliance is between professionals and managers, who will make up almost half of all employees by 2017, and the ‘new working class’ (increasingly in services, female, private sector and part-time) which will account for about 11 million people by 2017.</li> <li>• 80 per cent now work in the private sector (half in firms of under 50 employees) and only 20 per cent in the public sector; similarly 80 per cent work in various parts of the service sector and just 20 per cent in manufacturing and construction combined.</li> <li>• As sectors like health, education and care grow across state, private and voluntary providers, an alliance could be built around the ethos of public <i>service</i>, rather than just the interests of the public <i>sector</i>.</li> <li>• Common cause could be forged between the interests of professional freelance or self-employed people and those on insecure agency or temporary contracts (both poorly served by the welfare state).</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, the defining labour market shift was from manufacturing to services. The advance of globalisation and technology were expected to drive expansion in jobs at the top of the labour market and retrenchment at the bottom. The ideological stance was to promote social mobility through supply-side improvements, especially raising the skills and adaptability in the workforce (with limited regulation of the labour market). Upwardly mobile professional and managerial workers were seen as the decisive electoral group.

**2. The living standards of working people are stagnating as the share of national wealth going to low and middle earners declines and average wages flatten, having failed to keep pace with either rising productivity or prices.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To demonstrate fiscal responsibility, both in managing the public finances and protecting people from large tax increases, price rises or interest rate hikes.</li> <li>• To raise living standards among those on low and middle incomes, in a context where high employment (and occupational change) may not deliver this on its own and with limited scope for low or stagnant wages to be compensated through redistribution.</li> <li>• To challenge labour market inequality where the rewards of hard work and higher productivity are captured by a minority; or where it risks macro-economic instability.</li> <li>• To improve the quality of working life for those whose jobs are not well paid and whose chances of career progression are limited.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Austerity means material concerns are back at the heart of politics, in relation to both family finances and national prosperity (wages, prices, tax, public spending and debt).</li> <li>• There is a potential coalition of those on low and middle income to raise living standards, improve economic security and check the excesses driving high wage inequality.</li> <li>• However, economic insecurity and stunted material aspirations could find more divisive political expression – such as a form of grievance-driven politics that sets the interests of one struggling group against another.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, average household incomes grew strongly, albeit combined with rising poverty and inequality. The ideological stance was to reap the benefits of the global economy, reduce unemployment and put a floor under the labour market, through the minimum wage – with full employment expected to deliver rising wages and (along with redistribution) improved living standards for the majority. The electoral priority was building a coalition of low and middle income earners.

**3. A major divide is emerging around the age at which women partner and parent, against the backdrop of a continuing rise in non-traditional family forms and a plateau in rates of female employment (and a halt in the decline of male employment).**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To continue the revolution in women’s lives by updating the welfare state to prioritise childcare, social care and paid parental leave. This is essential to advance equality, raise the employment rate and broaden the tax base to fund public services.</li> <li>• To enable greater sharing of work and care within households and to reduce the number of households where no-one is in paid employment.</li> <li>• To address the consequences of ‘polarised parenthood’: children growing up in families low on money or parenting capabilities; and parents with low education levels or having to work long hours to earn enough to live.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forging an alliance of families means respecting their diversity while not being indifferent to committed, stable relationships or parental responsibility (including strong support for marriage and civil partnerships and recognition for the task of parenting).</li> <li>• Similarly, women’s aspirations are varied, from wanting to succeed in the workplace to having time with children and family (without being judged for either).</li> <li>• There is a political premium for speaking to a generation of men whose role in society is changing, both at work and at home.</li> <li>• At the last election, Labour trailed the Conservatives among women by four percentage points, but among men by ten – while the Conservatives remain widely seen as the natural party of the family.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, female employment rates were continuing to grow, while male employment was still declining in the wake of industrial re-structuring. The nuclear family was in retreat as lone-parent households and cohabitation rose, while marriage rates were declining. The ideological stance was to be non-judgmental about family form, aim to reduce teenage pregnancies and enable more women to work. The electoral priority was women, among whom Labour had received consistently lower support during most of the post-war era.

**4. The expansion of higher education is raising the qualifications of those entering work and increasing the proportion of graduates in society. However, there remains a core without qualifications, including many low-skilled (largely male) youth.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To maintain strong wage returns to higher qualifications through improving their quality and raising the demand for (and utilisation of) skills in the economy.</li> <li>• To seek a closer fit between skills (both academic and vocational) and the needs of employers, so that human capital delivers higher growth, employment and prosperity.</li> <li>• To aim for all young people to have good quality routes from education to employment, including through university and apprenticeships (in particular for the rising generation of low-skilled young people, often men, whose future prospects are uncertain).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduates are set to reach over 40 per cent of the adult population by the end of the decade. They have tended to be more liberal politically, though its distinctiveness as a group is likely to diminish as its numbers grow.</li> <li>• A clear majority of the electorate have not been to university and do not hold a degree level qualification.</li> <li>• There are still expected to be just under a fifth of the population with low or no qualifications in 2020. This group has fared least well from economic change and is arguably most susceptible to political alienation or extremism.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, the number of new graduates was increasing, but many people lacked qualifications and the vast majority of the adult population had not been to university. Youth unemployment had risen significantly following the early 1990s recession. The ideological stance was to increase the rate of university participation and improve educational standards across the board, especially among those from low-income backgrounds. Aspiration and opportunity through education, through life-long learning, was a core electoral pitch.

**5. The higher flow of migrants coming to visit or settle in Britain and leaving to go abroad is contributing to greater ethnic and cultural diversity and a more fluid population.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To not pretend that Britain can, or should, close its borders. People coming here to study and work – while others go abroad to do the same – is a feature of the modern world.</li> <li>• To demonstrate that Britain can control its borders and keep check on who is coming in and going out of the country.</li> <li>• To be clear that British citizenship is a privilege to be earned, including the benefits it brings; alongside offering protection for those fleeing persecution.</li> <li>• To recognise the unsettling effect of rapid population change, whether manifested in cultural anxiety or uneven economic impacts.</li> <li>• To defend tolerance and non-discrimination, including recognition for expressions of culture and identity that do not violate such principles.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High levels of immigration are unpopular among virtually all groups of the electorate, especially where the system is perceived to be out of control and where it contributes to significant population change, economic dislocation and cultural anxiety.</li> <li>• There are shared economic and social interests which can be forged between migrants and settled populations. Recognition of (non-discriminatory) expressions of culture and identity, both shared and distinct, is also necessary to build relationships of trust and understanding in an open society.</li> <li>• The toxic mix of economic insecurity and cultural division could create the conditions for far-right nationalist or populist anti-immigrant sentiment to take hold.</li> <li>• Ethnic minorities are a growing electoral group (perhaps 20 per cent by 2031), but an increasingly diverse one. They have traditionally been pro-Labour, but arrivals from Eastern Europe and strengthening Islamic sentiment may change this.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, migration flows were lower, the population was more stable and ethnic and cultural diversity largely reflected the legacy of post-war immigration. The ideological stance was to emphasise the benefits of Britain being open to the world, for business and individuals, while strongly opposing racial and other discrimination. Electorally, immigration was not a major issue while Labour enjoyed strong support from ethnic minority communities.

**6. Older people are the fastest growing demographic group, divided between ‘affluent actives’ and those struggling with poor health and low incomes. The number of under-25s is set to decline, offset by recent rises in the birth rate.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To meet the rising financial and caring pressures of an ageing society, through necessary investment and reform in areas like pensions, social care and employment.</li> <li>• To take advantage of the opportunities provided by ageing: like more healthy older people providing help with childcare or working longer while young people study.</li> <li>• To negotiate the intergenerational tensions posed by political power and economic wealth being held largely by older people, while many younger people face a less uncertain future than their parents (whether in relation to education, jobs, housing or pensions).</li> <li>• To respond to those needs and aspirations of older people that cannot be met through money and bureaucracy, like greater control over their lives and meaningful relationships with others.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A third of the adult population will be over the age of 55 by 2017 with older people are more likely to vote than any other age group, This group is increasingly diverse, contrary to the catch all ‘pensioner’ category: there are ‘active affluent’ people in good health, with money to spend and enjoying strong family and social connections.</li> <li>• By contrast the ‘older old’ are often in poorer health, have fewer relationships and are more dependent in various ways.</li> <li>• Older voters have been more likely to vote for the Conservatives, though the retiring ‘baby boomers’ create a chance to change this.</li> <li>• The rising birth rate has created a new bulge of families with young children. But the number of single, childless people has been growing and there are now two million more childless-couple households, both young and old, since the early 1990s.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, ageing was not a major demographic trend, while a bulge in ‘family formers’ as the baby boomers hit their 30s and 40s was the defining population trend. The ideological stance was to prioritise a reduction in pensioner poverty, while families with young children were the electoral priority.

**7. The rise in homeownership has slowed, including a big decline among under-30s. The number of people privately renting has grown substantially, while levels of social housing have stabilised but become further residualised.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To confront housing market failures that, over a period of decades, have made a decent home less affordable and the economy less stable.</li> <li>• To build more housing, while improving the quality and security of the private rented sector and a shallower ladder to ownership (especially for the young).</li> <li>• To rethink the notion of 'public housing' driven by the goal of a decent, affordable home for all, across different tenures. This includes the allocation of support to help people pay the rent or mortgage, and in seeking to buy a property or hold a secure tenancy.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The large majority of households – seven in ten – own their home. However, this number appears to be flat or even declining.</li> <li>• Far fewer young people own their home, some by choice (linked to studying longer or having children later) others for financial reasons.</li> <li>• There are a million extra private renters since 2000 and a sizable remaining portion of those in social housing. This creates the basis for an alliance to improve the quality and supply of the rented sector, plus more flexible access to homeownership.</li> <li>• The Conservatives had a large lead among homeowners at the last election. However, the biggest proportional drop in the Labour vote was among those living in social housing.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, homeownership was continuing to expand rapidly, while social housing was contracting and private renting remained largely a niche sub-market. The ideological stance was to promote homeownership, though without significant increases in new supply, and to improve the standards of social housing. Those aspiring to owning their own home were the priority electoral group.

**8. Mental illness and chronic conditions are increasingly the main drivers of poor health and disability, while lifestyle-related health problems have risen significantly.**

| New ideological tasks:  | New electoral landscape:  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To adapt both health services and the world of work in response to the rise in mental disorders and chronic conditions.</li> <li>• To enable disabled people to live independent lives and contribute fully to society.</li> <li>• To better understand the rise in mental health and behavioural conditions among children and young people.</li> <li>• To address the spread of lifestyle-related conditions, through better public health and citizens taking responsibility for their health.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A growing proportion of the population have a disability or long-term condition, have suffered from a mental illness at some point in their life, or have a close relative or friend in this position.</li> <li>• Disability is no longer a niche concern seeking to be recognised by the political mainstream; it affects people across age groups and social classes.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, physical disability was the major driver of long-term economic inactivity, especially among older men, linked to the ongoing consequences of deindustrialisation. The ideological stance was to advance disability discrimination legislation and, gradually, to address the persistently high level of incapacity benefit claims. Disabled people were not a decisive electoral group.

**9. Voting behaviour is more volatile as loyalty to political parties declines. But while formal democratic involvement is more fragile, other forms of civic and political participation are holding up and finding new avenues of expression.**

| New ideological tasks:  | New electoral landscape:  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To tap into the political agency outside of formal democracy; like greater transparency of power and the mobilisation of civil society.</li> <li>• To resist the temptation to control or assimilate these forces of ‘other democracy’ into existing structures; supplementing state power with citizen power.</li> <li>• To become more comfortable with a political culture marked by dissent and disagreement.</li> <li>• To prevent the domination of particular or special interests in democracy, including the risk of political alienation and extremism to which inequality in political participation can contribute.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More volatile voting behaviour and declining party loyalty across the electorate means that ‘swing voters’ are the clear majority.</li> <li>• Less than one per cent of the adult population are members of political parties, making them unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole (while reducing the number of reliable messengers and foot soldiers in the country).</li> <li>• Structurally lower turnout over the last three elections creates scope for expanding the electorate (especially when non-registered voters are included). This group is skewed towards young people and those in lower social classes.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, rapid falls in membership of political parties and trade unions were combined with further de-alignment between social class and voting patterns. The ideological stance was towards a managerial exercise of state power, as citizens withdraw from political engagement. Electorally, Labour had to ‘reach out’ to new supporters because its traditional voting base was becoming both smaller and less reliable.

**10. The rapid spread of the internet, digital technology and social media is changing the way people consume, spend time and relate to one another, while providing new avenues for political engagement and expression.**

| New ideological tasks:   | New electoral landscape:  |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To use new technologies to strengthen democracy, by holding power to account and help people to better communicate and build relationships with each other.</li> <li>• To remember that technology provides new platforms for politics, not answers to contested political questions. And that democracy requires deliberation not belligerence.</li> <li>• To adapt to a world where people increasingly want to do things for themselves, alongside others – not be told what to think or have things done for them.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapting to an age of less mass market communication, where people get their information about politics from many sources.</li> <li>• That creates the challenge of appealing to a generation more discerning and distrustful about politics, who want to engage on their own terms.</li> <li>• This poses particular cultural challenges for established political parties, which have historically sought to subsume social movements and single issue campaigns within its bureaucratic reach.</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, mobile phones and information technology had not yet penetrated the mass market, while rising household spending on consumer goods and private leisure activities were seen as indicating people’s declining involvement in politics. Electoral politics remained largely traditional, conducted through one-way communication via broadcast and print media, to passively receiving audience.

**11. Society has become more tolerant and liberal, such as the desire for autonomy and individuality. But this has come alongside resilience in aspects of culturally conservative sentiment, like the importance of recognition and roots.**

| New ideological tasks:  | New electoral landscape:   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To defend an open and tolerant society, including liberal advances which protect against discrimination and promote equality.</li> <li>• To respond to the desire for security, identity and belonging, that find expression in culturally conservative sentiment, alongside the widespread desire for autonomy, individuality and self-expression.</li> <li>• To harness the resources for advancing a centre-left politics in both liberal and conservative values; balancing redistribution and rights with recognition and roots.</li> <li>• To guard against the atavistic and transactional tendencies of liberalism and the oppressive and authoritarian elements of conservatism.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilising the culturally conservative sentiment in centre-left politics – like responsibility and relationships, tradition and patriotism – can help to reach into new electoral territory, often dominated by the right.</li> <li>• This can, and must, be done in a way that does not sacrifice liberal principles like personal freedom and non-discrimination – or descend into nostalgia or intolerance.</li> <li>• This could offer a route to forging new alliances where there is often thought to be irreversible division between liberals and conservatives, around the centre-left instincts in both (such as in common commitments to family, place, work and nation).</li> </ul> |

In the mid-1990s, mobile phones and information technology had not yet penetrated the mass market, while rising household spending on consumer goods and private leisure activities were seen as indicating people’s declining involvement in politics. Electoral politics remained largely traditional, conducted through one-way communication via broadcast and print media, to passively receiving audience.

The analysis above demonstrates how the ideological tasks and electoral landscape facing the centre-left today has been significantly reshaped by the new political sociology of Britain. It draws attention to the territory on which ideological advances, responding to the condition of the country, could be made. And it highlights the major electoral groups which are essential to any majoritarian project. The remaining question is whether these strands can be drawn together into a centre-left project, greater than the sum of its parts, capable of transforming politics.

**5.2 Foundations for a transformative centre-left politics**

Mastering the new political sociology to transform politics means confronting the following question:

- What implications do these insights into ideological tasks and electoral landscape provide for thinking about the centre-left’s orientation and identity; its strategy and statecraft?

Addressing these questions means reaching beyond narrow conceptions of ‘policy’ or ‘delivery’ to the larger issue of what might be the forces of political agency that could be mobilised to advance a centre-left project. First, any such political agency will not act in a vacuum, without competing forces, unforeseen events or historical context. Therefore, the centre-left’s political prospects must be considered in relation to alternative ideological, institutional and electoral forces – and the nature of its strategic engagements with them over time. This is not to suggest that such forces always stand utterly in opposition, or that alliances are not often both possible and desirable. But if the centre-left is able to master this new political sociology and grasp its opportunities, it will do so in the messy and contingent contest of democratic politics.

Despite its patchy electoral record, the 20th century saw many strategic and enduring advances for the centre-left: universal suffrage; education and health care for all; the end of Empire; greater civil rights and social equality; and significant constitutional reforms. Each of these have been buttressed by institutional and popular roots, forcing the mainstream political-right to concede and accommodate. Ironically, this has meant strategic victory sometimes coming at the expense of tactical advantage, as issues which once divided and motivated voters become uncontested (from the NHS to gay rights).

This is most obviously the case in the economic sphere, where the unprecedented affluence of the last three decades has been accompanied by some significant setbacks for working people, relative to the post-War era. This can be seen in the inequality, instability and insecurity that traces its roots to the economic restructuring and social dislocation of the 1980s. New Labour entrenched some countervailing steps, like the minimum wage and greater employment rights, but these were more ameliorative than transformative. In other areas, earlier advances such as in housing and pensions have been undermined; though recent reforms to the latter have recovered some ground.

Regaining the initiative in these and other areas is hampered by certain institutional forces, in both the market and the state. Most obviously, there is the historic power of capital and corporations, which has developed new and (in some respects) more intense forms in light of greater 'financialisation' (Palley 2007) and global economic competition<sup>29</sup>. Where it is concentrated in the hand of elites or not held to democratic account, bureaucratic *state* power can also act as an institutional constraint (especially if it is captured by either a sectional interest or a 'conservative' officialdom).

In important respects, the centre-left is also now less well equipped to counter those competing sources of power than for much of the 20th century. This is most clearly visible in the decline in membership of trade unions and political parties since the 1980s, which not only hamper its electoral prospects but also weaken its political power. The advance of social and legal rights has done little to overcome this fragility; indeed an increasing reliance on state and judicial agency is partly its consequence. There are a myriad of citizen groups, civil society organisations and online communities which have the potential to exert political agency (Hemming 2011), but few are mobilised as part of a broad centre-left project. There remain sources of centre-left thinking and ideas in universities and the wider academic community, but its links to the realm of practical politics are ad hoc rather than systematic. And few leaders of British business and industry are active figures on the centre-left, further restricting its intellectual vibrancy and political credibility.

In the battle to master the new sources of energy in politics, the centre-left faces competition from other ideological traditions and political forces. The Right today does not have the intellectual confidence it brought to bear to such effect in the 1980s. The Conservative Party under David Cameron does not have a governing project akin to Thatcher, although he has perhaps rediscovered some of her political determination. That said, the centre-left must reflect on how easily its vulnerabilities are being exposed, on issues from the welfare state to fiscal responsibility. And the risk of being pinned back into electoral enclaves: whether it be the North, Scotland and Wales; public sector workers; a metropolitan elite; ethnic minorities and migrants; or those in receipt of benefits.

The centre-left is also coming under pressure from nationalist, populist and rejectionist sentiment, beyond the mainstream right. This links to the broader cultural challenge of overcoming widespread distrust of politicians and the lack of confidence in the ability of politics to rise to the big challenges or help people solve the small ones. Thankfully the far right remains a marginal force in British politics, especially in comparison with some European countries, but it is a threat that cannot be ignored. On the broader left, potential alliances between social democratic, liberal and green forces have not yet been exploited, as those on all sides struggle to come to terms with the twin political realities of pluralism

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29 This speaks to an important debate not interrogated further here about how international institutions, like the EU, can counter this power, without in the process constructing an alternative bureaucratic constraint.

and pragmatism (or that no one party has a monopoly of wisdom and that politics is about negotiation and trade-offs).

Given this context, a transformative centre-left politics would prioritise engagement on four interconnected, though somewhat paradoxical fronts. What follows are not the elements of a policy platform, but instead an exploration of the ideas, interests, agency and alliances that could be mobilised to secure ideological and electoral advances. These aim to 'go with the grain' of change, respond to contemporary conditions and build majoritarian support. To have the chance of enduring, including in the face of attacks and events, they also seek ways to put down popular and institutional roots, which would help sustain the alliances and propel the agenda overtime.

### **1. Reform British capitalism, in the name of a more productive, innovative economy**

In this new era, shaping an economy that ensures good jobs and higher living standards for those on low and middle incomes requires a coalition to reform capitalism in the service of a more productive and innovative economy, where working people 'share in the proceeds of growth'. Self-regulating markets and the existing structures of economic power can no longer be counted on to deliver national prosperity or rising affluence for the vast majority of the country.

Reforming capitalism is necessary to maximise the talents, efforts and rewards of all the people; through fully exploiting the creativity and wealth that can be generated by competitive markets and productive capital. This requires action to limit the tendency of capitalism to concentrate power and resources, become inefficient and closed to new ideas, and periodically lurch between instability and crisis. Reforming capitalism is essential for Britain to be a 21st century economic success story, able to meet and master the challenges it faces.

This draws on the insights of the new political sociology; and the new conditions, realities and possibilities it reveals. These include: the financial crisis and the instability it has sparked; the intensity of international competition as global economic power shifts to the East; the reality of climate change and its roots in the current economic model; the stagnation of wages and their decoupling from productivity; the extent of technological change and its impact on the nature of production and work; the stability in occupational composition and the limited returns to skills in isolation; the long term British disease of underinvestment; high levels of personal and public debt; and the long term fiscal constraints posed by the structural deficit in the public finances and the narrow tax base.

The task of constructing a coalition to reform capitalism should not be underestimated. When Thatcher achieved it in the 1980s it was accompanied by deep dislocation, pain and conflict, not to mention a major recession. The economic structures and power relations in contemporary capitalism are deeply embedded and have proved remarkably resilient, despite the intellectual and political crisis still unfolding following the collapse of Lehmans. However, this and subsequent events have created a new possibility. The British variety of capitalism is currently failing on its own terms: there is a scarcity of (productive) capital, sclerotic economic activity, and the system is not generating higher prosperity for the majority.

There is now a (long overdue) debate about the new ideas and policies which might steer British capitalism along a new course (for example, Hutton 2010, Lent and Nash 2011).

But far less attention has been paid to the interests, institutions, alliances and agency which might be harnessed to achieve it:

- Creating a coalition to reform British capitalism requires new institutional stakes in the ground which would set the economy in a more productive and innovative direction. This will require reforms led by the government, but not greater state control or micro-meddling. Instead new ‘rules of the game’ are needed that alter the terms of engagement for individuals and firms, in the interests of Britain in a globally competitive economy. These should attend to issues ranging from banking and infrastructure, universities and innovation, to corporate governance and wages. That involves remembering the difference between markets (systems of economic exchange) and capital (sources of economic power) – and the reforms needed to both to maximise their potential.
- Reforming capitalism is even more pressing given the position of the public finances and the perception that the state is a constraint on economic activity. For the foreseeable future, there is no prospect of masking or ameliorating economically rooted problems through higher public spending. And reducing government borrowing, repaying public debt and meeting rising cost pressures (like health care and pensions) are already in the queue for any additional taxation deemed desirable or necessary. Therefore, a strategy of economic reform is essential if the reality of fiscal constraint is not to leave major economic and social problems in its wake. The case for such reform must rest on its contribution to liberating the economy to engage the ideas, skills and hard work of all the people, which self-regulating markets and unrestrained capital will not achieve.
- A project for reforming capitalism must reach out to important and rising voter groups to help build an electoral majority, while also mobilising economic agents across society to help advance it. This means bringing together the interests and instincts of those on low and middle incomes, plus those at the top who can be drawn into alliance. The essential voter groups are professionals and managers; the ‘new working class’ (overwhelmingly private and service sectors, increasingly female and part-time); and the self-employed, small business people and entrepreneurs. But more than a band of supporters, an alliance of forces to advance reform is needed. This could include:
  - Firms with a commitment to quality products and services and a highly skilled and well managed workforce
  - Strong business leaders promoting the needs of British industry, beyond the financial sector (especially in the cities and regions outside London)
  - Local institutions that forge alliances between businesses, with roots in particular places, to advance investment, growth and employment
  - Investors seeking longer-term returns, like pension funds and ‘patient capital’
  - Modern trade unions and other trade or professional associations committed to promoting good work and challenging bad work
  - Credit unions, building societies, mutuals, social enterprises and other aspects of the ‘social economy’
  - Philanthropists, ethical consumers and other individuals committed to reforming British capitalism.

- A project for reforming capitalism must be framed around the national interest: the conditions for British prosperity in the 21st century. Paradoxically, it is now precisely because of the intensity of economic competition that a reformed British capitalism is required (Lent and Nash 2011). In this context, those standing outside this coalition for reform would include: those people or companies who add no productive value to the economy; firms devoted to short-term returns or profit maximisation at the exclusion of all else; sectional or vested interests of all kinds who want special treatment or an unfair advantage; power hoarders in the public, private or social sector; and those not meeting their responsibilities to society or free-riding on the efforts of others.

## 2. Recast the public sphere, through reform with roots not just higher spending

A transformational centre-left project should aim to recast the public sphere to secure those vital goods and protections that the private market and the majority of individuals cannot secure alone. This means responding to core economic risks and social needs – like housing, unemployment, pensions and care – alongside public services like schools and hospitals. These are central to improving people’s lives and underpinning national economic success. The public sphere should advance national priorities, be majoritarian in scope and distinct from either the size of the state and the level of public spending. Drawing together what is currently defined as the welfare state, public services and local government, the public sphere should be recast through ‘reform with roots’ which entrenches ideological advances and helps to build popular and enduring alliances – beyond a particular level of spending.

The content of that public sphere emerges from the new political sociology, not least reflecting the major shifts since the Beveridge era, including: rising longevity; more adults living with disabilities; fewer women at home to care for children and relatives; more students delaying entry into employment; a more polarised labour market; and weaker trade unions. The character of the public sphere has ebbed and flowed over the last hundred years. Education and health have been entrenched as universal services, free at the point of use. Housing was mainstream and majoritarian in the 1950s and 1960s but has since become increasingly marginalised. Financial security for children and disabled people has been extended, but weakened for those losing their jobs. Childcare and social care are both patchy and precarious, reflecting their emergence from more recent sociological shifts.

One lesson from this historical sweep is that structural reforms which put down institutional roots are most likely to be transformational and resilient, whereas particular instances of public spending (or rates of taxation) tend to be ameliorative and transitory. This lesson can also be seen in those elements of New Labour’s legacy which have the greatest potential to endure, such as the minimum wage, devolution, parental leave, Academies, children’s centres and civil partnerships. Public expenditure can help, with extra investment having paid for more teachers and doctors and new schools and hospitals. And passing laws can signal intent, to reduce carbon emissions or end child poverty. But unless they are combined with structural or system reforms, alongside popular and institutional roots, they risk being neither transformative nor enduring.

The issue of pensions helps to demonstrate this nuance. Rates of personal saving, levels of employer contributions and the allocation of government subsidy are not yet appropriate to ensure good quality pensions for many older people. However, Labour’s

reforms to the pension system – a workplace pension for all, re-establishing the earnings link, a higher retirement age – create the basis for a settlement that can endure under attack and be incrementally advanced. More broadly, it forged an alliance of interests around reforms to the state, the market and society which reshaped the ‘rules of the game’, rather than meddling in the minutiae.

Therefore, rather than focusing on the size of the state or the level of spending<sup>30</sup>, the centre-left’s objective should be to recast the public sphere in ways that address the core economic risks and social needs of the population through reform with roots:

- This requires a new statecraft and model of change that reaches beyond just more state and spending. This is not only based on the reality of the fiscal position or the various expressions of hostility towards the state, though both are real. It also recognises the weaknesses, discussed above, of such a narrow strategy for securing real and lasting advances. Neither ‘market failure’ nor ‘individual account’ models offer credible alternatives. The first sets out from the wrong place, market outcomes, which are then corrected, rather than starting from a set of goals for society which are pursued in a variety of ways. The second hardwires fragmentation into the system, setting different groups against each other rather than fashioning shared interests, thereby sowing the seeds of its own fragility.
- Instead, the centre-left needs a statecraft which pursues national priorities across a broader canvass. This means distinguishing the strength of the public sphere from an abstract debate between state and market provision. It should:
  - meet core economic risks and social needs, which improve the quality of people’s lives and advance national priorities
  - make strategic choices about which services and protections to prioritise, rather than trying to affect everything a little
  - aim to change the ‘rules of the game’, through institutions and system reforms, not least to encourage diversity and innovation in provision, rather than standardisation
  - face up to tough choices on public expenditure (and new funding options) to enable new or improved services or protections, rather than just defending the status quo
  - be majoritarian, not marginal, in seeking to build shared interests between potentially divided groups, not make micro-offers to particular groups
  - forge partnerships with people and give them real power over their lives, rather than doing things for them or to them (including expecting citizens to meet their responsibilities)
  - devolve democratic power to the nations, regions, cities and rural areas of Britain, rather than hoarding it at the centre
  - recognise the value of human relationships and remember that meaningful change only occurs when people play a part in bringing it about themselves.
- A recast public sphere should for example, place a new priority on childcare and social care. Meeting the rise in care needs will not be achieved by the private market or the majority of individuals alone. But it is central to supporting family life, boosting the employment rate and broadening the tax base, while advancing gender equality

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30 Or, indeed, the ‘right balance’ between the state and citizens, or the state and markets, to which there is no abstract or universal answer.

and life chances. It would help to build alliances and shared interests across different family types and between generations. For example, if older people do not receive better care, the burden will fall on the young (who will themselves need support in their old age). To have maximum effect it would be complemented by improved parental leave and greater sharing of care and work between men and women.

- However, advancing the public sphere in this way would not require standardised, state-run or centrally administered services. In fact, a choice of providers and a relational element to delivery are both vital in care services. The state's job would be to regulate and fund for quality, coverage and access. Recasting in this way would require other aspects of the public sphere to receive relatively less priority – including perhaps schools and hospitals – or for universal services to be enhanced at the cost of some universal benefits. It certainly requires a determined focus on efficiency and productivity in the public sphere – and an open mind to reforms that will reduce costs and bring in new sources of funding. It may be possible to scrap what is now, in effect, a highly erratic and often extraordinarily expensive 'Social Care Tax' (that is, the current costs of social care) – which can massively deplete people's inheritance pot – with a more certain (and lower) level of social care costs plus a more protected and predictable estate to be passed on to their children (albeit taxed at a higher rate).
- A recast public sphere should also reach beyond 'service delivery' to support core economic and social needs, pitched to the majority of the people – around wages, jobs, housing and pensions. For example, enhancing income security for people losing their jobs could forge an alliance between those on low and middle incomes, while underpinning a strategy for full employment (Cooke 2011). This would contrast with the prevailing conception of 'welfare', which has become synonymous with a dependent minority, with little to offer working people. Similarly, the private market has failed to meet acute housing challenges, while the public sector has retreated into the niche of social housing. A majoritarian public sphere would aim to pursue decent, affordable housing, reaching across tenures and harnessing reforms to state and market. It would stand for decent workplace pensions, rather than either defending a sectional interest or pursuing division to the detriment of all. Finally, it would redistribute democratic power, including to strong local government and local political leaders, to give people more avenues to build alliances and overcome conflicts of interest.
- The right has its own version of the public sphere: the Big Society. This is based on a belief that the state and spending are actually the causes of the country's problems. This approach risks leaving the government with its hands tied behind its back, without the tools to turn a rhetorical argument into a governing agenda. David Cameron should remember just how much state power was mobilised in advancing Thatcherism: privatising industry, breaking the unions, deregulating the city and policing social unrest. The conditions for true freedom, strong relationships and a strong society are extremely demanding, requiring not least the regulation of market power and the democratisation of state power.

### 3. Harness cultural sentiment, by recapturing what's Left' on the Right

To transform politics, the centre-Left should reach into those sentiments captured by the Right, but which express its own best instincts and can add strength to its project. This conjures up the concept of 'triangulation', associated with New Labour and the Clinton Democrats before it. Tony Blair was not wrong to look at where the Conservatives were strong and Labour weak; indeed it was instrumental to his political success. However, there is a big difference between conceding political ground from a position of weakness and recapturing territory, previously ceded, that contributes to strategic gains.

Exploiting the latter requires the centre-left to be clearer and more confident about its purpose, while showing more humility and honesty in the service of pursuing it. Paradoxically, the lesson from New Labour is that it was too superficial in its engagement with the right. The centre-left must now go deeper in recognising where its opponents have 'stolen its clothes' – and seek to re-appropriate them. The task is to draw strength from liberal and conservative sentiment – where each express centre-left values – and build on areas of common cause between them. This can help the centre-left to reach into new ideological and electoral territory, currently owned by the right, to broaden the political resources at its disposal.

In pursuing this objective, the risk of collapsing into triangulation is real and requires conviction to avoid it. However, it can also guard against the opposite danger: shrinking into a narrow sect of 'true believers'; drawing ever tighter boundaries of political purity; denouncing any view that questions the orthodoxy; and being unwilling to acknowledge the strength in alternative arguments and perspectives. Failing to listen to and learn from your opponents is just as politically damaging as caving in to them, if not more.

Since the 1960s, the centre-left has won and entrenched major socially liberal advances, protecting people from discrimination and extending their personal freedom. These gains must be defended (and potentially extended as society evolves). But this can be done alongside greater attentiveness to certain conservative expressions of culture and identity which would nourish a centre-Left politics. Too often, a 'tin ear' to such popular concerns – such as those which stretch beyond, rational, material or legal matters – have limited the centre-left's political resources and potential electoral alliances. Overcoming this strategic weakness means being prepared to engage with the right so as to re-capture the territory which it has occupied:

- Recapturing what is 'left' on the 'right' is how liberal and conservative sentiment can be held in productive tension; balancing rights and redistribution with a concern for recognition and roots. The desire for autonomy, self-fulfilment and individuality is widespread in British society. But so is the yearning for a sense of security, tradition and belonging, unvanquished by modernity or materialism. Economic insecurity and cultural anxiety have almost certainly strengthened these instincts. However, the centre-left has tended to either deny or oppose the 'conservative' aspects of these sentiments, despite their political expression being up for grabs.
- Conservatism can be authoritarian and oppressive, just as liberalism can be atavistic and transactional. However, there are aspects of conservative sentiment that have long been captured and defined by the right but which contain sources of political energy for the centre-left. Such a list would start with:

- People taking responsibility for their actions, fulfilling their obligations to each other and treating others with civility and respect
  - Protecting cherished institutions and stable relationships that reach beyond market and state, whether in the family, civil society or nation
  - Preserving things of value as well as making progress to something new, traditions as well as modernity, stability as well as change
  - Patriotic pride, a sense of national identity and the desire to be part of something bigger than oneself
  - The importance of our natural landscape and rural communities
  - Common sense, self-restraint, delayed gratification and hard work
  - Forging common attachments and shared identities, as well as the space for personal autonomy and individuality
  - Valuing family ties, putting down roots and making enduring commitments to particular people, places and institutions.
- All of these sentiments are invariably associated with the right; but there is nothing in them – when expressed with compassion and solidarity – which are not compatible with any definition of socialism or social democracy. The paradox is that by embracing the conservative aspects of its political tradition the centre-left can better advance its goals. It is only in recent times that the centre-left’s promotion of progress and modernity has come at the exclusion of such ‘conservative’ instincts, rather than alongside them<sup>31</sup>. By restoring such dimensions of centre-left politics – without sacrificing personal freedom and non-discrimination – issues like crime, defence, the family, welfare and immigration can be contested with much greater intellectual confidence and political authenticity<sup>32</sup>.
  - Restoring the cultural and conservative aspects of centre-left politics also broadens out and opens up its project. It highlights the limits of an overly bureaucratic and managerial statecraft, insensitive to particular traditions and circumstances. It widens governing strategies beyond just the state and spending, to engage citizens, associations and institutions and across society in advancing its goals. It guards against an elitist politics that thinks it knows best, entrenching the gulf between the political class and ordinary people. It revives the notion of political parties as vehicles for changing society not only controlling the state. And it focuses on the importance of articulating a national purpose that connects to both popular sentiment and everyday experience.
  - It would also help to reach into the right’s established electoral strongholds. Speaking to both liberal and conservative instincts is an essential part of building majoritarian support. However, this means avoiding the glib assertion that the electorate is divided between a ‘left-wing’ working class and a ‘right-wing’ middle class, or that the working classes values community and the middle classes liberty. A centre-left orientation that sustains the paradox between its liberal and conservative – and its economic and cultural – dimensions would open up the potential for forging common

31 Following the 1906 election and Labour’s first real parliamentary breakthrough, Philip Snowden observed that ‘the Labour Party had drawn its support very largely from conservative working men’ (Pugh 2010: p.66).

32 In response to the summer riots, one commentator argued for a return to ‘patrician socialism’: <http://labour-uncut.co.uk/2011/08/18/labour-should-recover-its-patrician-socialist-streak/>.

interests where there is often assumed to be division. This could include the difficult questions raised by greater cultural diversity, in respecting freedom of expression and association while promoting economic integration and preventing social segregation.

- The alternative course for the centre-left would be to ignore or sneer at this conservative sentiment. Or, even worse, to think it is the job of politics to convince people that what they feel is wrong. This would not only forfeit political opportunities, but deny the centre-left's own rich intellectual and political traditions – not least of drawing strength from notions of popular common sense<sup>33</sup>. Respecting the things people care about and choose to value does not mean abandoning the contest for their political expression and implications. For instance, greater diversity requires tolerance of difference, but that does not mean giving up on trying to forge shared interests or deciding to elevate fragmentation to an ideology. The task for the centre-left is to build a politics where the recognition of both distinct individuality and common bonds go hand in hand.

#### 4. Pursue a plural majoritarianism, to build electoral alliances and advance goals

The final element of a transformational centre-left project is to craft an enduring popular majority from the new political sociology of Britain, which can not only win elections but also help advance and entrench its project in the country. This means drawing strength from two paradoxes at the heart of democratic politics: First, pursuing majoritarian support, while being comfortable with pluralism; second, neither ignoring what the voters think, nor simply trying to satisfy their preferences<sup>34</sup>. These are demanding tasks, but essential foundations for the centre-left's political success.

Over the last two decades, the task of understanding the electorate has gained a bad name, often presented as a marketing exercise standing in opposition to a politics of principle. However, responding to the lives and experiences of the people is a vital ingredient of political success, albeit one that cannot be fulfilled by polling alone. If the centre-left aspires to being a truly democratic movement it must draw strength from people and the country, not try to achieve things despite them.

By the end of Labour's time in government, focus groups, opinion polls, newspaper headlines and particular anecdotes offered a caricatured and often outdated account of what Britain was like. The result was not just electoral defeat, but a profound sense that the party had become 'out of tune' with the country and detached from ordinary people's lives, instincts and experiences. But the problem was not too much polling or too many focus groups.

Instead it was the gradual shift away from a strategy of majoritarianism – aimed at knitting together different interests and values in the service of a common cause – towards a tactic of patchwork politics. The sociological concepts of fragmentation and individualisation were married with a political trend towards ever more sophisticated exercises in

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33 In his recent history of the Labour Party, Martin Pugh argues that: 'Labour did not transform working-class political culture so much as adapt to it...this habit of adaptation and accommodation to existing culture and to the formal institutions of British politics is destructive of the heroic element in explanations of the party's historical rise, but it offers the most realistic means of accounting for Labour's success' (Pugh 2010: p.11)

34 This recalls the book *Angels in Marble* about the Conservative party in the 19th century. The title, from a leader article in *The Times*, referred to how Disraeli had seen the potential conservative voter in the newly enfranchised British working class, just as Michelangelo might have seen the angel he would go on to carve in a block of marble (McKenzie and Silver 1968).

chopping up the electorate to identify specific sub-groups with distinct interests. The political strategist Mart Penn's book *Micro-Trends* is the quintessential expression of this approach, albeit for the US (Penn 2007).

Micro-targeting of voters at election time is a necessary part of competitive politics. However, voter targeting and political strategy must not end up collapsing into one. The task today is not to search for the latest 'Mondeo Man' or 'Worcester woman', less still to try to make enough micro-offers to enough sectional interests to get over the winning line. Instead, it is to pursue a majoritarianism which speaks to the national interest and seeks to build alliance across the country; not only to secure votes at election time, but to seek a partnership with citizens and civil society – including what Rosanvallon calls the 'other democracy' – to advance a shared political project.

The traditional way of thinking about building a majoritarian project is through the prism of class. Through this lens, the centre-left's electoral success in the 1990s can be seen as a variation on a traditional theme: winning back working-class voters lost to Thatcher in the 1980s and bringing in a wider set of middle-class voters. Since 1997, Labour has shed support across all social classes – under pressure from economic insecurity and cultural anxiety – and is now stuck in a faux debate about whether it should try to win back 'core' working-class voters or 'swing' middle-class voters. Given that the answer to this question is self-evidently both, it provides few politically creative insights. In fact, a narrow class-based perspective suffers from a number of longer-standing weaknesses.

There has always been significant cross-class voting; both working class Tories and middle-class support for Labour. There are now fewer 'core' supporters of any party and increasing numbers of 'swing', or floating, voters across the board. More people are supporting smaller parties than in the past and a significant number are consistently not voting (or registering to vote) at all. And there are cultural concerns which inform people's political views which are not reducible to economic or material interests. Such values dispositions invariably cut across class divides, as forthcoming IPPR research will show. However, 'circumstances of life' (including class) are not irrelevant to the task of building a majoritarian coalition; but must be seen alongside values and geography as core elements of a 'three-dimensional' view of the electorate:

- Any plausible centre-left majority project must reach across working-class and middle-class voters; remembering that these groups are neither wholly distinct nor internally coherent. The working class is divided between the remaining male, manufacturing element and the rising female, service sector group. Similarly the modern middle class has professional, liberal; traditional conservative; and more materially-focused, status-orientated guises.
- There are probably only two useful lessons for the centre-left that can be drawn from a class-based perspective alone. First, that it must focus on 'swing voters' – as these are the people whose votes are up for grabs and so decide elections – but recognise that these are not all middle class. And second, that it must also appeal to 'working-class' voters – as they have not disappeared and are no longer automatically loyal – but remember that they are not necessarily attracted by a more liberal or left-wing politics. An alliance of working and middle class Britain could be built around their areas of shared interest: higher living standards, a strong public sphere and recognition of both liberal and conservative values.

- Drawing on the new political sociology of Britain, a centre-left majoritarianism founded on an appeal to the national interest, rooted in a patriotic spirit, and addressed to the condition of the country must:
  - Encompass the expanding professional and managerial class; the ‘new working class’ (increasingly female, part-time and employed in the private, service sector); and an alliance of the self-employed, small business people and entrepreneurs <sup>35</sup>.
  - Reach deep into the groups that now dominate the electorate: over-50s; private sector, service workers; and homeowners – as well as appealing to both men and women.
  - Capture new electoral territory by building alliances with: the rising generation of ‘active affluent’ older people; the growing ranks of ethnic minority and new migrant voters; the expanding group of private sector renters; and the increasing number of people living with a long-term condition or disability.
  - Aim to forge shared interests between liberal and conservative sentiment, around common centre-left values and sentiment (the rising ‘green’ constituency of voters and interests might be seen as spanning this divide).
  - Recognise the distinct nature of English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish politics and its electorate in the post-devolution era; as well as the geographic dimension to British politics: north and south; urban, suburban and rural.
  - Expand the electorate by seeking to mobilise the votes and agency of those currently alienated from the political process; especially young people and those from lower social classes.
  
- Beyond these particular voter interests and potential alliances, the centre-left must also draw strength from the democratic paradoxes described above. This requires a genuinely plural majoritarianism, which assembles a broad front of political interests and forces advancing shared centre-left goals. This requires all the potential elements of a centre-left alliance to accept the reality of a more volatile and dissenting political culture, while also committing to the practice of pluralism. Such an alliance could include social media and online campaigns, and the panoply of trade unions, citizen groups and other civil society institutions which constitute the ‘other democracy’ outside formal parliamentary politics. A revived municipal spirit, underpinned by strong local democratic institutions and leaders should also be part of this. Sustaining the paradox of pluralism and majoritarianism is a demanding task given the centre-left’s tendency towards tribalism and sectionalism.
  
- Most seriously, the centre-left must avoid being left behind by the new political sociology and ‘out of tune’ with the country Britain is becoming. If it does not grasp how the electorate is changing, it risks speaking to sectional interests, being attached to declining demographic groups, and left playing patchwork politics. Across Europe, the centre-left is in danger of being identified (however unfairly) with electoral enclaves: the public sector, a cosmopolitan elite, ethnic minorities and immigrants, manufacturing workers and those in receipt of state benefits. Finally, it is worth reflecting on who might sit outside of a centre-left plural majoritarianism. This might include: the irresponsible and intolerant; those not prepared to work hard or pay their fair share; unaccountable elites and vested interests.

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35 A report from the Centre for American Progress argued that the key groups for the centre-left are: traditional working class; professional, educated middle class; singles and seculars; young Millennials; immigrants and minorities; woman (Browne et al 2011).

### 5.3 Conclusion: capturing the possibilities in moments of juncture

This paper has sought to shed light on what the new sources of energy in society mean for the task of advancing a transformational political project capable of both winning support and changing the country. It has suggested that to have a chance of achieving such a project, the centre-left will need to harness a coalition of ideas and interests, agency and alliances to:

- Reform capitalism to promote a more productive, innovative economy
- Recast the public sphere through reform with roots, not just spending
- Harness cultural sentiment by recapturing what is 'left' on the 'right'
- Pursue a plural majoritarianism that builds electoral alliances and advance its goals.

It has argued that engaging in a systematic way with the changes that have taken place in the political sociology of Britain since the mid-1990s can provide new ideological and electoral resources for the centre-left, drawn from the condition of the country, to advance these goals.

Finally, it is important to remember that the course of history will not be determined by political sociology; it merely establishes the context for the contest. Alongside contingent events, human agency and the actions of opponents, politics is also shaped by a more intangible sense of 'mood' or 'spirit' that characterises a particular moment in time. While in business there is a premium on understanding the 'new' and the 'niche', in politics it is the 'now' and the 'ordinary' that really matter. 'Going with the grain' and 'being on the right side of history' are hugely important commodities in politics.

Twenty years ago a confident era of modernity and optimism defined the spirit of the age, following the end of the cold war and the triumphalism of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. New Labour captured the mood of that time and used it for political advantage. By contrast, the mood today is altogether more anxious, insecure and distrustful. All political parties are struggling to come to terms with the volatility of economic, social and cultural circumstances, of which panic on the trading floors and riots on the streets are just the most obvious manifestations.

This raises the issues of junctures and possibilities in politics. There are moments in time when the future is up for grabs: when the party or movement that is able to make sense of what is happening has the chance to shape the course of events. Both the Attlee and Thatcher governments did this; harnessing political junctures to make lasting changes in their image. It is not yet clear, but this moment may mark a much more significant juncture than the mid-1990s. There is undoubtedly uncertainty in our economic, social and cultural life and new sources of political energy whose course and expression is not yet determined.

Whether Britain – and the wider western world – is currently in the midst of a political juncture or merely a gentle evolution from the past rests, in part, on what leaders and citizens alike choose to do next. For now, it is not clear that the opportunities of volatility and crisis are being grasped. The right is in power today, but unlike in the 1980s, it seems stuck with tactical manoeuvres in response to volatile public opinion.

That provides an historic opportunity for the centre-left, to not only win elections but to transform politics. To do so it must understand the new sources of energy in society to advance its ideological agenda and redraw the electoral map. This paper has tried to show how it could go about doing just that.

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