



An interview with the new chair of ippr, James Purnell

ippr: why did you want to become chair of ippr?

James Purnell: *Obviously, I worked here nearly 20 years ago [James was a Research Fellow on ippr's media project] so there is a strong personal connection. But also, ippr has been at the heart and history of the centre left over that period. Indeed it was the place where the renewal of Labour started, with the Commission on Social Justice and many other projects. Now, with Labour's defeat there is an urgent and important task of renewal again – and so I'm delighted to be rejoining the organisation in the role of chair to help with that process – and in the wider task of arguing for progressive change.*



ippr: There have been huge changes in the political and economic landscape, how do you think ippr's role has changed?

James Purnell: *In the end, a think tank is always judged on the quality of its ideas. And they stand and fall on their merit. But a difference that strikes me from working here in the 1990s and now is that now ippr has unrivalled experience of working closely with government. It has huge credibility because its ideas have been taken up and tested – so although there's been a change of government, ippr is respected because it knows the policy process – what works and what doesn't.*

ippr: How do you see ippr's role in rebuilding the centre left after the defeat of the Labour government?

James Purnell: *Clearly although ippr is independent of any party, there is a strong link between ippr and Labour. Our values are those of the progressive centre left – so we will hope to have a strong influence in shaping the new thinking of the centre left. But the world has changed a lot, and it is not just a question of coming up with a lot of pre-packaged policies. The rethink needs to be more radical and bold than that – to go back to its roots. I think ippr is well placed to assess what worked well and what*

worked less well during 13 year of Labour government. It can see what the good parts of the record were but it is courageous enough to say what the blind spots were too. That is important – nothing should be off limits.

ippr: Given ippr's history and values, how much influence can it have on policy under the Coalition government?

James Purnell: It goes back to the quality of our ideas. But ippr has good relations with politicians from the parties in the Coalition – ministers and others. For instance, I remember Steve Webb was on the Commission for Social Justice and is now a Minister in the Department of Work and Pensions. The Coalition has said it is a progressive government so we assume they will be interested in good progressive policy ideas. On a personal note, as a Cabinet Minister I tried wherever possible to work in a cross-party way, in particular on pensions policy and implementing the Turner Commission's report.

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