We can be a movement capable of making the 21st century the era of progressive change

Serving a Cause, Serving a Community

The role of political parties in today's Britain

Douglas Alexander MP
Dr Stella Creasy

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Douglas Alexander MP
Dr Stella Creasy
September 2006

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Douglas Alexander has been active in the Labour Party for nearly a quarter of a century, having joined in 1982. During that time he has held a range of positions from branch secretary and General Committee (GC) delegate to member of the National Executive Committee. In 1999 Douglas coordinated Labour's successful Scottish election campaign and was thereafter appointed by the Prime Minister to run the 2001 general election campaign, which delivered a second landslide Labour victory. In addition to his campaigning work for Labour, Douglas has written extensively about the challenges facing the British left and is author of *Telling it Like it Could Be: The Moral Force of Progressive Politics* published by the Smith Institute. He is now the Secretary of State for Transport and Scotland and represents the constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South.

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Introduction

Today as politicians we face a paradox. While the British people are increasingly politically interested, joining pressure groups and campaigning on local and global issues, activity connected with traditional party politics has never been so low and continues to fall. This disjuncture between political parties and the British public threatens our democratic legitimacy, as interest in social change morphs from questions of partisan difference to a cacophony of single issues. Political parties themselves are increasingly being blamed for this disconnection. Thus the Power Inquiry says 'the current way of doing politics is killing politics' and concludes that only those 'outside' political institutions can reform the public realm to redistribute power to the people.[1]

The disparity between party politics and 'people' politics underlies a deeper democratic disquiet. Public opinion now dictates that party affiliations somehow lessen the capacity of elected representatives to make decisions which are in the interests of the community they serve. Trust in politicians and political institutions, that most precious resource which fortifies democratic legitimacy, is low and continues to fall. The increasing participation by the public in political action through activism and campaign groups heightens the perception that political parties no longer fulfil their role as forums for collective pursuit of social change. As turnout, party membership and party activism fall, the voices grow louder asking what use are

politics and politicians to the British public? Bluntly, some pose the question: 'Why do political parties matter?'

Unquestionably, concerns about the conduct of political representatives affect the public's perceptions about the purpose of political parties. This is nothing new. From the Zinoviev letter to the Profumo Affair, each generation has contended with issues – both party and personal – that have challenged public trust in politics. Today, opinion on the action in Iraq remains divided among Labour Party activists and the general public. Of a different order, issues around party loans and even chauffeur-driven cars driving behind cycling politicians receive widespread media comment and coverage. Yet there are matters at stake here which go beyond today's headlines that we ignore at our peril. These long-term trends have led to 40 years of diminishing participation in the public realm.

A continuum of political engagement can now be discerned among the British public in how they choose to participate, or not, in the public realm. Marked by four categories – 'party' politicos, 'no-thanks' politicos, 'we' politicos and 'me' politicos – this continuum reflects a break with the traditional relationship between the public and its political representatives. At one end is the dwindling band of party political activists who, while increasingly less active than their predecessors, remain overtly partisan. At the other end, in growing numbers, are those 'no-thanks' politicos who consider politics to be of no significance to their lives. Their interest in their locality or country is passive rather than expressed through any form of activism. As a result party politics offers little to interest them because its very purpose is not of concern to them – even if they agree with its ultimate outcomes.

Between these two extremes lies the bulk of the British public: those who are politically interested but are more and more choosing to express this through participation in pressure groups and community organisations – the 'we' politicos, or their consumer choices, the 'me' politicos. These categories show how the British public continue to seek social change, whether individually or

collectively, but are less and less likely to view political party activism as the way to pursue their ideals.

We cannot and should not let this situation go unchallenged. Those who argue that politicians must bear some of the blame for public disengagement from politics and the lack of trust in democratic institutions are right to challenge the practices of political parties. Yet in responding to this continuum this pamphlet takes an unfashionable view. It upholds and argues for the role of political parties as an integral part of a thriving pluralist democracy. Renewal of the role of political parties to modern life is not just a concern for those in Westminster, but goes to the heart of our civic and social wellbeing. Political parties should bring people with shared beliefs to debate, develop ideas and work collectively to bring them about, while pressure groups are formed from people of many different beliefs with one goal. Animal welfare demonstrations may gather people from the libertarian left to the far right; in contrast, political parties are debating how to bring about the good society with the compromises that are entailed. Indeed, without political parties to organise coalitions of people who share the same sense of 'what is right' into groups who work together in pursuit of a common purpose, politics and public decision-making would be rooted only in the temporary whims of populism, with scant regard for the inevitable consequences of any decisions made.

As politicians, we have to respond to the challenge that disengagement from political parties represents to rethink how we 'do' governance. But this changing approach to politics also challenges us as Labour to rethink how we as a party 'do' activism, to make sure we are a vehicle for the aspirations for social change so many British people seek. Those who believe Labour's relationship with the public can be renewed through straightforward changes in our constitution or our leadership alone underestimate the scale of the challenge our party faces in reasserting its connection to contemporary Britain.

We need to better understand the society in which we seek to do politics and the changing expectations the public now has of the

public realm. When we do, we see that we who value the role political parties play must work harder at communicating how and why political parties are the answer and not the question. Instead of a false choice between 'party' or 'people', we need to find new ways of reorganising and restating our purpose to reflect our role as a collective organisation which seeks to achieve social change on behalf of the people and places we represent.

The value of Labour to our country comes from its role as a political party serving a cause and as a political movement serving the community. Party renewal must therefore be rooted in both these aspects of our work, offering the public a clear articulation of our political views and their practical expression in our actions at both local and national levels. Voting is a quintessentially political act and we have to make clear how and why it matters to our country's future. Robin Cook put the task facing Labour best when he wrote:

> *Our democracy is no longer perceived as a process belonging to the many who participate in it, but [instead] the property of the few celebrity politicians. Political parties do not achieve renewal by reshuffling staff in their leader's office, but by changing the culture, priorities and direction of the organisation. . . . Renewal must be about more than reviving party political support for Labour. It must also offer a prospect of giving politics back a sense of excitement, and rekindling the interest in the political system. That means a return to value-based politics . . . political choice is about the kind of society in which voters want to live, and the good society is not defined by its pass rate on performance indicators, but by the values that shape it.*[2]

Our recent history as a party is not necessarily the best guide as to how we should embrace this new challenge. During the 1980s and 1990s the process of Labour Party modernisation was driven forward by successive leaders. While this was necessary, indeed vital, given the condition of the party at the time, the contemporary circumstances require a different approach. Cultural rather than constitutional

change cannot be achieved simply by direction from the top of our party. Instead we need to develop a partnership between every section of our party, joined in common pursuit of renewal. Each of us, from national representatives to local members, must take responsibility for adapting and reforming our party and our practices if Labour is to thrive again in contemporary Britain.

This is new ground for Labour but it is integral to our future. We need to reconnect ourselves and our movement with the progressive ambitions of British people so that to be part of our party's work is also to be a social activist. Labour activists must be the bridge between the communities in which they live and work and the political movement of which they are part. We need to show in word and deed how for today's public being part of our political movement is a meaningful way of trying to secure social justice. Addressing this task requires us to look at the messages, means and members of our movement and ask how to inspire political activism in modern Britain.

Yet the way our party operates still does not reflect a modern world in which life is a clash of work, home and civic commitments: we have to be more flexible and accountable at all levels. We must find new ways of reaching out to those who share our values, but question whether party activism is the right route for their energies by reforming the sometimes overly bureaucratic and exclusionary cultures which can wither even the most passionate enthusiasm. New technology can offer some ways forward but to become a party which can be both a symbol for social justice and a catalyst for change in our communities, we need to reform both our methods and our mindset. Only by developing an outlook which can engage people across society will we be able to build and sustain the progressive consensus vital to ensuring progressive politics and policies are the ones which define our age.

This process of renewal is integral to both our political beliefs and our electoral prospects. And the stakes could not be higher. Change is inevitable in the modern world, but our response to it is not. We can either progress as a party or wither away in the absence of a

willingness to adapt. If we progress as a party we can grasp the opportunity of a nation which continues to be politically interested to fashion a consensus that progressive values must dominate political activity, helping to embed our vision of the good society as the purpose of good government. The time has come now for the party not just to talk of the need for renewal but to act at all levels to achieve this ambition. This work is an appeal to every member of our party to join in the process of renewal so that we can be a movement capable of making the twenty-first century the era of progressive change.

Insights at the outset of renewal

1 **Renewal is a matter for us all**: Party renewal is not just a concern for our leadership but is a task to which all must contribute if it is to be successful. As a party our culture matters as much as our constitution.
2 **Our values are expressed in word and deed**: We serve the cause of social justice and the communities of Britain. Labour must be a grassroots organisation as well as a political philosophy.
3 **From closed network to open network**: The strength of Labour lies not just in its people but in its reach. Our success in renewal must be judged not by our numbers but by our capacity to connect with the public.
4 **A community hub**: We need to turn outwards and draw those who share our values but not our party into our work. We must be a focal point for community concerns and action, working with residents in every locality in pursuit of social justice.
5 **At home in the future**: Labour needs to recognise the potential offered by modern technology and invest in its capacity to open up our activities to members and the wider public.
6 **Communication as an end not just a means**: Labour must be engaged in a two-way dialogue, offering the

public information on the issues that matter to them and listening and responding to their desire for knowledge.

7 **Members matter**: We should not be afraid to innovate in our policy-making, local selection procedures and organisational structures. We must do this while upholding the rights and responsibilities for members.

8 **Stronger professional support**: Labour must rebalance our resources from national campaigns to local organisers who can lead a step change in local activism.

9 **Transparent political funding**: A clear and fair framework grounded in a mix of state funding and political donations is vital to the health of our political parties and our public realm.

10 **Renewal cannot wait**: The process of renewal is critical to the future of our politics and our party. We must set out a clear timetable for action to reconnect Labour with the people it serves.

Deliberation and debate is the way you stir the soul of our democracy.

Jesse Jackson

1. Just how bad is it?

Turnout and participation in the British public realm

Electoral participation is a litmus test of the health of our democracy. Average turnout at the 2005 election averaged 61.5 per cent, which was slightly up from the 2001 turnout of 58.9 per cent but well below the peak of 82 per cent in 1950. While low turnout in national elections is a relatively recent phenomenon, local elections have attracted only half as many people for decades. For all the razzmatazz around the 1997 election, turnout was the lowest since 1945. To understand the difficulties we now face we have to look back to the postwar era, when the body politic was something in which the majority of Britons were engaged.[3]

So, too, a closer look shows falling participation is not constant across the nation. Geography plays a part, with 42 per cent in Liverpool Riverside rising to 77 per cent in Dorset West.[4] As the Electoral Commission reports: 'turnout is generally higher the more affluent the area'.[5] Age is also important. Since 1992 voting in the 18–24-year-old age group has declined markedly; this is worrying because habits of non-voting in youth are carried forward into middle age. People from black and minority ethnic communities are also less likely to vote, with the abstention rate being higher for those under 25. While we should be concerned as a society by the falling participation in the electoral process, that this trend is particularly stark for the poor, the young and those from black and minority ethnic communities is a particular problem for our progressive ideals.

Without involvement by all sections of society in choosing how resources are used there is a danger that only the needs of those with the loudest voices or largest wallets will be heard. As Harriet Harman noted when she was Minister for Constitutional Affairs, the greater people's dependency on the state, the less likely they are to vote; she called this the 'democracy deficit'.[6]

This failure to vote is not rooted in apathy. The Power Inquiry, MORI's research and the 2003 ESRC Citizen Audit survey all reflect how the British public retain a strong interest in political issues and action if not party politics. They also believe in democracy in principle; research shows that nearly 80 per cent think voting is a civic duty[7] and have done so for decades. Instead it shows how the public does not see a concern for social change as party political. While turnout has fallen, people have taken to the streets to demonstrate vocally and in large numbers on subjects as diverse as the war in Iraq, making poverty history and even to protect foxhunting, as well as giving time and money to social activism in our communities. These trends reflect the bigger question facing political parties about their role as organisations which can bring people together to campaign for and implement social change. As the psephologist Paul Whiteley has commented:

> *It is easy to exaggerate the decline in participation. The lesson of the audit is not so much that participation has declined, but rather that it has evolved over time and taken on new forms.*[8]

As politicians and progressives, we need to understand this change and what the move from overtly political to social activism means. Drawing on the research conducted by the Power Inquiry and the 2003 Citizen Audit survey,[9] a continuum of political engagement can be defined. This shows how there are four stages of political engagement which illustrate the differing ways that individuals seek to act on their political opinions. The attitudes behind these stages are not mutually exclusive, but, crucially, the evidence shows that they

have diverged from each other. This analysis illustrates why this has repercussions for party political activism.

The 'party' politicos

'Party' politicos are the smallest group of the four stages. They are the members of a political party, whether active or not. Declining political party membership is true in most advanced industrial democracies; with the exception of Spain, political party activism is in decline and has been for some time with falling party membership across the political spectrum.[10] Here, membership of the three main political parties is less than a quarter of the 1964 figure. The rate of decline has increased over the last two decades – even in 1980, 1.7 million people were involved in political parties, representing 4 per cent of the electorate. By 1998 this had fallen to just 840,000 – 1.9 per cent of the voting public.

It was not always this way. In the 1950s Labour gained nearly half the national vote and had almost a million members; between 1994 and 1998 Labour Party membership increased to over 400,000 members and 43 per cent of the vote. Our current membership is just under 200,000[11] and we gained only 33 per cent of the national vote in the last election. Membership of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats mirror this heavy decline – 40 years ago the Conservatives had over 2.5 million members, in contrast to the estimated 253,600 in 2005, and the Liberal Democrats have fallen from a 1983 high of 145,258 to 72,031 in 2005.[12]

These figures reflect how political parties are increasingly reliant on a small number of members to make their case. In 2004, only 1 per cent of people said they had campaigned for a political party in a general election, with the same figure for local elections.[13] There is strong evidence that people are simply unwilling to associate themselves with a political party, even at election time. The British Election Study showed that in 1964 44 per cent of electors described themselves as 'very strong' party identifiers compared with 14 per cent in 2001, while in 2005 it was just 11 per cent.[14]

While some have attributed this decline in activism in the Labour

Party to the actions of New Labour in government, research shows us that it pre-dates 1997. Seyd and Whiteley show that in 2001, activities such as delivering leaflets or attending party meetings among Labour Party members had declined by a third since 1991.[15] In 1990 half of our members went canvassing; by 1999 that had fallen to under a third. Their research shows the growth in non-participative party membership. In 1990 only 47 per cent of members were not active in a month; by 1997 it was 63 per cent and by 1999, 65 per cent. Our remaining members are increasingly reluctant to campaign, leaving too many Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) reliant on a handful of hardy activists to devise, design and deliver our leaflets. This is not a problem just for the Labour Party. Seyd and Whiteley's work with other political parties reveals the same trends and that the majority of political party members of any persuasion are now not active.

This chimes with the everyday experience for many of us who are active in political parties. While some local CLPs have reversed this trend and are experimenting with new structures and forums to involve members, for most being quorate is a struggle and party officers devote many hours to cajoling party members to come out and campaign or select representatives. A good turnout for any party event is now considered to be double figures. It is easy to see why Professor Marilyn Taylor has said of membership of a political party that it has increasingly become a 'minority sport'.[16]

The 'no-thanks' politicos

The second group, the 'no-thanks' politicos, are the polar opposites of the 'party' politicos. If 'party' politicos continue to be party members even if they are not active ones, this approach to politics manifests itself not in anger but in agnosticism. They see the structures of the public realm, and those who act within them, as irrelevant to their lives.

The Electoral Commission 2004 *Audit of Political Engagement* found 49 per cent of the public had not taken part in any form of political activity in the last two years.[17] The audit also found that 14 per cent of those not registered to vote were simply not interested in voting in the first place, while 17 per cent of the public did not want a

'say' in how the country was run. Critically, 12 per cent of the public would not be willing to participate in any activity including signing petitions, donating money or writing to a newspaper. Mirroring these results, the ESRC Citizen Audit survey found that 14 per cent of the population had no desire to take part in any form of political behaviour intended to achieve a form of social change.[18] These studies reveal a persistent percentage of people who see politics in all its forms as irrelevant to their lives. Thus, while a much bigger group of people than those engaged in party political activism, the 'no-thanks' politicos are also a minority group.

Perhaps part of this response lies in the belief that 'politics' itself is the problem rather than the issues at stake. In 2003, MORI research showed that while 78 per cent of people say they are interested in national issues and a similar proportion in local issues, only 58 per cent said they were equally interested in 'politics'.[19] While 37 per cent of the public think 'politics' is about how the country is governed, 14 per cent believe it is about 'arguments between politicians and/or political parties'.[20] Thus, the 'no-thanks' politicos represent the alternative end of the continuum of political engagement to those who remain involved in political parties, and an increasing public frustration with politics itself.

The 'me' and 'we' politicos

Between these two extremes lies the bulk of the British public. The ESRC Citizen Audit survey shows how the British have both a strong sense of civic duty, and a real concern for social change which translates into political action.[21] Drawing on 17 different types of political action, ranging from participating in a strike to wearing a campaign sticker, this study found that three-quarters of the public had engaged in one or more activity in a year and a third had taken part in five or more. This corroborates the evidence that the British are as politically concerned now as they were 20 years ago.[22] This interest in the realm of politics, but not in politicians, offers a different challenge to political parties than the 'no-thanks' politicos who seek to avoid all political engagement.

The ESRC Citizen Audit survey identifies two different approaches to political action. The first is focused on collective forms of action such as participating in a campaign group or attending a public meeting. Thus, as the Electoral Commission *Audit of Political Engagement* shows, while only 1 per cent of people claimed to have campaigned in a general election for a political party, three times as many have taken part in a political campaign which is not defined by party political activities.[23] They are the 'we' politicos, the growing band of people who work directly with others for a shared political concern. This work can take a variety of forms but involves discussion and debate with others in order to determine action. For example, they may directly contact representatives, such as approaching politicians and public officials, or participate in organisations such as pressure groups or tenants' organisations which share a common emphasis on collective action.

This willingness to act with other like-minded people exists particularly at a local level and several studies have shown that over a quarter of the public has volunteered for a local organisation in the last two years.[24] Tellingly, research by the Hansard Society found that many people involved in their neighbourhoods, such as school governors or tenants representatives, do not consider themselves to be engaged in 'political' activities.[25] Many people also choose to participate in local decision-making processes even if they do not participate in local democratic processes. Recent research showed that 38 per cent participated in a 'civic activity' in the last year, such as attending a public meeting or meeting a councillor.[26] This evidence shows how there is now a growing culture of participation in collective forms of action, which is now replacing party political engagement as the focus for social change. Indeed, 37 per cent of those who did not vote in general elections were members of, or active in, a charity, community group, public body or campaigning organisation.[27]

This is an approach to social change which is particularly strong among those under 50. While younger citizens are less politically active, they are often more socially active than their older

counterparts. Indeed, new research shows that 16–20-year-olds are much more interested in direct action and social activism than their older cohorts.[28] However, at the same time they eschew engagement with political representatives in comparison to older activists. While 16 per cent of people aged 55–64 had lobbied a local councillor in the last two years, only 1 per cent of those between 18 and 24 had done the same.

In contrast to this group-oriented approach, the ESRC research also shows another approach to social change used by a much larger section of the public.[29] The 'me' politicos' attitudes are grounded in acts of personal, often consumer-based and passive, forms of political campaigning. The Make Poverty History campaign reflects these different approaches. While 250,000 marched, over eight million bought white wristbands to wear. In the last two years nearly half the British population has signed a petition and one in five has boycotted something as a protest. The ethical living commentator Leo Hickman recently argued that such personal financial sanctions can be the most effective form of influence.[30] He stated:

> *As individuals, what levers of influence do we have available to us to affect real change? Four spring to mind: the ballot box, the protester's placard, the shopping basket, and the share certificate. But it's a reflection of our times, perhaps, that many of us now feel the last two seem increasingly likely to be the most successful paths to making a difference. After all, when you want a company to take notice, money doesn't just talk, it can also shout as loud as a foghorn or caress the ear with sweet nothings. As shoppers, we're increasingly getting into our stride when it comes to demanding our ethical considerations be addressed: if we don't like what we see or hear, we can just spend our money elsewhere.*

As this quote reflects, such personalised activism is often rooted in altering consumption patterns to secure change rather than working with other members of society. While 'we' politico activity often

involves attending meetings and giving up time to discuss a shared approach to campaigning, 'me' politico activities are done by individuals in their own time and at their own pace. Being a member of a tenants' group often means attending meetings or speaking with other residents about a matter of concern, while boycotting goods requires interaction between the shopper and the check-out.

The evidence suggests that those who take 'me' politico and 'we' politico approaches to political action overlap but are not the same people. The ESRC Citizen Audit survey reveals how one in ten people who had contacted a public official had also taken part in a public demonstration and that one in two people who had contacted a public official had also purchased goods for political reasons.[31] It is easy to understand how a person could move between being a 'no-thanks' to a 'me' or 'we' politico. For example, they could become concerned about proposals for a mobile phone mast in their locality and so start a petition, which draws them into interaction with their neighbours as they work together to lobby their local authority on the matter. Indeed, the overlap between different stages of the political continuum is not only among non-political activists. Increasingly, political party members are becoming de facto 'me' politicos who pay their membership dues and do not participate in any other form of activism within the party.[32]

Yet the ESRC Citizen Audit survey makes it clear that some people are more persistently engaged in 'we' political activities than others who only act in 'me' ways. It shows how people who engage in boycotts of goods are more likely to give money or wear a badge for a campaign, while people who attend political meetings are more likely to participate in public action and protests as well.[33] There is thus a growing divergence between people who choose to express their political views in partnership with others and those who choose to be political through their personal purchases or acts.

All forms of political engagement can be effective and are part of a thriving public realm. However, crucially for political parties, comparison with data on political engagement from 1984 shows that while both 'we' and 'me' politico activity has stayed consistent or even

increased, activity involving party political representatives has declined. Previous Citizen Audit research shows how in 1984 30 per cent of respondents had contacted a politician, but only 13 per cent had in 2000.[34] The low numbers of people who take part in any party political activism suggests a growing divergence in attitudes towards effecting political change. People interested in political issues, whether through collective or individual forms of action, are increasingly less likely to be actively involved in political institutions.

A continuum of political engagement

British history tells us that alongside political parties, social activism has always been an important influence on the public realm. Indeed the development of a progressive political party came through collaboration between social groups such as cooperatives, trade unions and campaign bodies. This reflects how in previous generations there was substantial movement between the differing stages of engagement. However, this analysis shows that movement along the continuum into the final category – the 'party' politicos – is less likely as more people engage solely in social activism. Those who hold progressive values and put time and effort into campaigning for progressive causes are increasingly less likely to see the value of putting it into party political activity to the detriment of progressive political parties. Yet this is not simply a problem for the left. It can be seen to be affecting all political parties as their membership and activism continues to decline. The weakening of this link is a contemporary phenomenon. Thus, the fall in turnout and declining party membership reflects not just a disinterest in party politics but a changing approach to achieving social change. Political parties must address this if they are to renew their role as vehicles for social change within the minds of the British people.

2. The challenge

The forces shaping the contemporary public realm

The Power Inquiry argues that the 20 years after the Second World War was a period of 'technocratic and paternalist welfarism' with high levels of participation in elections and party political activism. Contrasting these previously high levels of engagement with the kinds of current approaches to politics described in the previous chapter the Inquiry argues that 'the problems of disengagement have developed not so much from changes in the political system but changes in the citizens'.[35] This reflects how the move towards social and personal activism by the public is not a passing phenomenon but is instead rooted in the nature of modern life. To understand how this has happened and so what needs to be done to re-engage the public with political parties we need to ask: what are these changes in citizens and contemporary British culture which affect the way political parties are viewed by the public?

The personal is political: the age of self-authorship

The concept of self-authorship describes the desire for autonomy that characterises the experience of modern life, particularly in the last century. Shoshana Zuboff and James Maxmin describe in their book *The Support Economy* how those companies which respond to consumers' personal needs succeed in capitalism in comparison to those companies which seek to 'manage' consumer demand by giving them limited options from which to choose.[36] This reflects how

modern capitalism is determined by the ability of individuals to use their resources to actualise their own desires. While Zuboff and Maxmin's work focuses on the changes in society which define contemporary capitalism, this analysis can be extended to participation in the public realm. We are used to exercising autonomy through our consumption patterns, but not in our public lives. The ease of shopping online with Tesco, in which the store front is personalised to reflect your previous choices and you the consumer can decide when the shopping is delivered, stands in sharp contrast to the staid and bureaucratic processes often used to interact with government.

Institutions developed to uphold deference to authority and paternalism from elected officials mean that citizens are less able to 'own' the processes of decision-making. It is important to recognise the increasing institutional alienation a public used to exercising autonomy feels when confronted with the offices of the state. Indeed, especially for younger generations who have grown up always knowing a culture that expects such personal control, the way our institutions are organised means that traditional forms of public engagement do not offer the opportunities for self-expression and empowerment that modern consumers require.

Participation is often constructed around the needs of the public realm rather than the public. The structures designed to encourage public engagement belong to an era when participation meant to watch rather than to speak in public debates. Whether it is the rigid traditions of town hall debates which bar public interventions or their status as a 'stranger' in the House of Commons, the way the members of the public are expected to participate does not recognise them as partners. This is endemic in many political organisations, particularly political parties. While Keir Hardie's generation would not recognise many of the policy challenges we face, they would still be familiar with many of the structures used to organise the Labour movement. We may live in an information age, but our way of conducting ourselves springs from the industrial era.

In contrast, the concern for autonomy upholds the importance of

'me' forms of participation to support individualism. The campaigns around Fairtrade exemplify this, prioritising and encouraging personal activities to achieve their objectives. This offers both more immediate gratification and greater control to the individual about the difference they can make to their world: buying Fairtrade chocolate helps a shopper make an immediate and so personally gratifying link between their concern for people in developing countries and their own actions to resolve them. There is a clear comparison with the often frustratingly slow and byzantine processes of securing social change through participation in local public meetings or lobbying politicians. As the Power Inquiry comments: 'Increasingly wide use is being made of consumer power, lifestyle choices and digital technology to bring about change.'[37] It seems no coincidence that those organisations which use 'me' activism have seen a substantial rise in membership. Between 1971 and 2002 Friends of the Earth grew from 1000 members to 119,000 and between 1981 and 2002 Greenpeace grew from 30,000 to 221,000 members.[38] In tandem with this, the decline in activism experienced by several other collective organisations including the trade unions and the cooperative movement reflects the problems facing progressive activists in asserting how collective endeavour can be empowering for individuals in an age when people are increasingly distrustful of such activity. Given these issues, it is no surprise that both of these organisations have over the course of the last five years begun to ask difficult questions of themselves about how best to renew their role within British society.[39]

The 'me' politico activities also remove the inherent frustrations of collective activity which come from having to compromise and achieve a consensus. Instead, by working in a personalised way these activities chime with the feelings of self-authorship and control prioritised in contemporary society. Inevitably shared forms of decision-making mean finding agreement with other participants and being held accountable for opinions expressed. In contrast, 'me' activities allow the individual to capitalise on 'doing good' often without being challenged about the impact of their choices by others.

When many of the 'we' or 'party' politico activities rely on participation in structures which suppress rather than thrive on autonomous action, it is easy to see why, in the era of self-authorship, more people are turning to personal and, perhaps as a result, more liberating forms of social action.

It waits for no one: time and the public realm

Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the insecurity and fluidity of modern life make it much harder to engage people in the gradual changes that progressive politics require.[40] People find their time, their lives and their relationships pushed and pulled by the competing demands of a modern economy. These pressures are exacerbated by a sense that control, or self-authorship, is a marker of success. So, activities considered less integral to their quality of life are dispensed with and those which are more immediate and offer a greater sense of self-actualisation become more attractive. Not only do our current hierarchical forms of governance offer little sense of empowerment to individuals, they also require substantial amounts of time and effort. The scheduling of local authority meetings or political party events often reflects tradition rather than the time constraints of most potential participants. Oscar Wilde put the problem more simply when he said that 'the problem with socialism is that it takes too many evenings'.

Recent research for the Fabian Society shows how time management has become a defining aspect of contemporary culture. Individuals across all social classes are working longer hours with greater levels of pressure on their time than ever before. In its survey, 41 per cent of respondents identified 'time' as the most valuable resource in life, ahead of 27 per cent stating energy and just 18 per cent citing money. As the author Michelle Harrison comments:

> *Contemporary British people place as much value on their time and energy as they do on their money . . . it actually provides an important clue to understanding some of the most important challenges in current public policy.*[41]

In parallel with the desire for self-authorship, Harrison highlights the growth in 'mass affluent' consumers who have higher levels of income than ever before and higher expectations of services. However, this group has less trust in others to make decisions for them so they feel more pressured to worry about services themselves. At the same time, they experience the 'time squeeze' as their working hours increase leaving them less time in which to manage both their service concerns and expectations. While those in higher income brackets feel 'busy', they also feel empowered because they view this squeeze as symptomatic of their own importance. They are often able to use their financial leverage to dictate when and how to take time out of their lifestyles to manage their concerns. In contrast, those on lower incomes are more likely to report feeling overwhelmed by trying to cram more activities into less time. Many state they feel they have less control over the pressures they face.

This perception, of having more to worry about but less time to do it in, not only impacts on the provision of public services but also participation in the public realm. Indeed, it is not difficult to understand how 'no-thanks' politico attitudes towards formal mechanisms of participation develop when public meetings and consultation processes are not structured at present to meet the needs of most citizens who have jobs, children and social lives to juggle. In this context, personalised and more autonomous forms of activism, which can be more flexible, also become more enticing. It is ironic that while we seek to find ways to improve the work–life balance of the public, there is little thought given at present to how to improve the 'work–civic–life' balance of communities.

I know my place: the collapse of deference

Related to the desire for self-authorship has been a parallel cultural shift which has generated a collapse in deference towards traditional figures and institutions of authority, who are now are instead viewed with increasing scepticism. The political historian David Marquand described governance in the early twentieth century in the following way:

> *The atmosphere of British government was that of a club, whose members trusted each other to observe the spirit of the club rules; the notion that the principles underlying the rules should be clearly defined and publicly proclaimed was profoundly alien.*[42]

The institutions of formal democracy were constrained in favour of elites and thrived in a culture of subjection or reverence for those in authority. After the Second World War, particularly in the 1960s, this culture began to change, matched by the wider collapse of the 'club' hierarchies which had been the core of this form of governance. By the end of the century many of the institutional relics of these 'club' elites, from the Empire through to the hereditary peers, had been superseded with new forms of power and authority.

Many elected politicians rightly welcome the end of this rigidity, sharing a distaste for the old hierarchies it sustained and barriers to progressive progress it created. Yet the public is no longer sure what role a politician plays in the state. Without a narrative about politicians not as members of an elite but as representatives of the public, this gap has been filled with a corrosive perception that they are not public servants but fair game. While it is right to hold politicians to account for their views and actions, there is now a blurred line between upholding standards expected in public life and politics as public entertainment. Current assumptions about politicians reflect a very different ideal. In the eras of Churchill, Lloyd George and Clement Atlee, it would have been unheard of to ask politicians about their personal lives or intimate habits; yet it is now deemed acceptable and indeed in the public interest.

Politicians have become increasingly fascinating as performers, which divests the role of its critical powers. This 'celebritisation' means that politics is increasingly seen as a matter of competing choices in people rather than policy. This removes the key motivation behind participation and diminishes the very rationale of politics and political parties as agencies which can advance a political agenda grounded in political values. The perception that those in public life, whether pop stars, politicians, religious leaders or editors of news-

papers, are there to amuse could ultimately lead to the assumption that they are there only to further their own ambition.

This lack of trust in public agencies and those who represent them shows how an aura of doubt about the role of authority pervades contemporary Britain. Longitudinal research into trust in public institutions shows this has been developing for some time.[43] Research for the Audit Commission[44] emphasises that lack of trust means people are more likely to question the information and services on offer, engendering an aura of uncertainty about the capacity of public agencies to deliver their promises. Politicians are at the sharp end of this decline, as the public trusts political parties much less than government. The 2002 survey showed that while 47 per cent tends to trust parliament and 43 per cent the government, only 16 per cent trusts political parties, with 76 per cent of people saying they do not. Once politicians were statesmen and women whose role was to be revered; now they symbolise everything of which one should be wary. Contemporary society is increasingly defined by a culture of mistrust of the motivations and purpose of politics and political parties, so further undermining the value of participation.

Lost in translation? Politics and the press

While the infamous comparison of the relationship between the media and politicians to that of a dog and a lamppost might have some truth, both sides share an interest in a healthy public realm where issues are debated, and attempts made to resolve them. Journalism sees itself, rightly, as an essential element in a democratic state; it is a critical part of the quality of civic life, which in turn reflects the accuracy, discussion and thought in the society's journalism. Given this, the condition of the public realm raises questions about the relationship between the press and politicians.

As Tom Bentley has argued in *Everyday Democracy*,[45] democratic participation needs to be anchored in everyday experiences, yet for most people politics is filtered through the mass media and its accompanying commentary. The Power Inquiry highlighted how the increasingly acidic relationship between media and politicians in

Britain, through which politics is defined, has contributed to public disengagement from the public realm.[46] The caustic nature of this relationship contributes to a sense that party politics is not about achieving social change but power.

The critical role played by the broadcast media in defining how political parties are seen by the public is relatively recent. While party political broadcasts started in 1950, the 1959 election was the first to receive television coverage because of concern about violating the law on impartiality. Now election coverage embodies much of the corrosive nature of the relationship between the press and politicians; as David Herman noted of the 2005 general election,[47] it is about 'politics as carnival; rejoicing at the humiliation of the mighty. Making sense of complexity, it is not.'

Recently, much of the debate on media and politics has involved the charge of 'spin' – that politicians and their aides promote a sanitised or illusionary account of their policies and projects. Politicians and the media have acknowledged that this is not about a lack of difference between parties but a culture of mistrust about how such differences will be portrayed.[48] The American senator, Barak Obama, put best the quandary now facing political parties:

> *Somewhere between the partisan deadlock and the twenty-four hour news cycles, the contrived talking points and the focus on the sensational over the substantive, issues of war and poverty, hopelessness and lawlessness become problems to be managed, not crises to be solved. They become fodder for the Sunday show scrum, not places to find genuine consensus and compromise. And so, at some point, we stop reaching for the possible and resign ourselves to that which is most probable.*[49]

Indeed, the USA offers a salutary lesson of the dangers in failing to address the relationship between the press and politicians. Many of the major TV channels and radio stations are places where political positions and pronouncements are given extreme form and the subtleties and compromises of governance are lost in the noise of

entertainment. Rational debate and deliberation about matters of national concern have taken second place to 'infotainment' with the drama of personality clashes and the spectacle of controversy. While political reporting in the UK is not equally hostile, in seeking to renew the role of political parties in our democratic processes we must be wary of the alternatives.

As Obama highlights, this relationship is self-perpetuating by both sides. Political parties have significantly changed their approach to the media. The rise in professionalism in political communications has benefited progressive governance. Labour can be proud of the improvement since the disastrous amateurism of the 1983 campaign; it was a necessary and integral part of modernisation. The Labour Party would not have been able to convey a vision of the good society and why it should be elected in 1997 without this step change in its communications. However, when the capacity to communicate overshadows what is being said, we need to reflect on how politicians, as well as journalists, operate. Reflecting on American political debate, Joe Klein, the political commentator, recently called for an examination of the role of consultants in political life because he feared they were encouraging a disproportionate concern with public relations rather than political choices. He argued: 'Rather than make the game more interesting, they have drained a good deal of life from our democracy. They have become specialists in caution, literal reactionaries.'[50] The techniques of media management should not get in the way of the message and the mechanisms of governance themselves or the ability of the public to engage in the work of political parties.

Furthermore, we need to recognise the difference that modern news gathering has made to both press and politics. Our access to 24-hour news and satellites, enabling instant information from across the globe, changes the way that our society consumes information. We are increasingly exposed to the concerns of communities thousands of miles away. The British public realm is no longer a shared national arena in which participants exchange the same information and develop common opinions about matters of mutual concern. Cable

television and the internet allow us to pick and choose the kinds of information and issues on which to receive news, so the shared discussions of yesterday's era, which happened on the front page, national news programmes or political salons, are no longer the defining mark of the public realm. Just as consumers seek autonomy in their shopping, so they also seek greater control in their information choices.

The Henley Centre now characterises the nature of modern communicative cultures as being like a 'dog-bone' in which we are more in touch with issues in other continents – 'the world' – and more interested in issues at close hand – 'my world'.[51] However, the space in between these two areas of concern – 'our world' – which has traditionally been the focus of the national public realm such as our local communities or even national matters, is less prominent in our cultural experiences. Practising journalists and those who study the news point to the changing practices in modern journalism which such developments have encouraged. As modern life becomes oriented towards consumption, the media as a whole has adapted to their customers. In his recent lecture, BBC political editor Nick Robinson highlighted how audiences for terrestrial news bulletins have declined for the last two decades, and argued:

> *On demand broadcasting allows people to download and time shift what interests them. We need to rethink how people find news and current affairs content in an era of using search engines not* Radio Times.[52]

The rising influence of blogs, chatrooms and interactive comment pages as a form of information dissemination should also not be underestimated. This represents a growing trend for comment, as much as fact, to be considered 'news', and transforms public discourse as so many more can take part. Anyone can contribute to a blog or chatroom and their readership is now much greater than individual newspapers or broadcasters. Recent research shows that there are now more than 35 million blogs worldwide and that around one in four

users of the internet actively engages in online content.[53] The technology means that the reach of these mediums is not restricted by national distribution boundaries which traditionally restricted other forms of media. Indeed, the editors of the UK-based entertainment and current affairs messageboard, Popbitch,[54] estimate that more than 350,000 people read their weekly newsletter worldwide. Blogs and messageboards undoubtedly will form an increasing part of the public realm, and so the portrayal of political parties, in the years to come.

While the media is an essential component of democracy, which can provide the public with information and insight into politics and politicians, the concerns of 'spin' and the broader social trends driving media reporting of politics confine the space in which the press and politicians can work together for the benefit of a thriving public realm. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for political parties to renew their relationship with the public.

Class realignment and de-alignment: social mobility and the public realm

Social and economic trends have transformed contemporary living and the way the British engage with politics. Just 50 years ago many families were created, and lived, socialised and worked in the same small area. This in turn made them part of a strong, predominantly class-based political culture along with their friends and work colleagues. Famously, Pulzer declared in the late 1960s that 'class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail'.[55] Certainly, partisan sensitivities grounded in social class were the basis for much political action. Studies in the 1940s found that 75 per cent of respondents' political and voting behaviour was rooted in their family background and social class.[56]

In the last 40 years the cultural and social ties of class which underpinned these relationships have been transformed. Now the networks in which people live are spread out, often over the country and internationally, and social mobility means we are less likely to stay in the same areas, or work or live with the same social groups

through our lives. These trends affect how the public engages with political parties. The very organisation of local politics and political activism is harder in areas with transient populations, without the social bonds and relationships which give preference to collective forms of engagement.

The impact of these changes is not simply a logistical problem about getting Labour sympathisers together. Politics has become less of a fixed and overt presence in defining identity for contemporary Britons. The strong ties which existed in the early part of the last century between social classes and political parties, and shaped voting intentions, have either corroded or become more flexible in the last 30 years. As different class groups move around the country and interact, the British have become less 'tribal' about who they support, and consequently less likely to associate themselves and their interests with a particular political party.

As party support has become a more fluid concept for many, so too has political engagement become a less settled aspect of life than before. Geography is now an important predictor of voting behaviour, independent of class, reflecting how people with similar values and social class vote differently throughout the UK. These trends are neither good nor bad, but confirm the changing way the British public approaches the role of political parties. While once support for a particular political party was rooted in collective class interest and defined how voting was important to an individual, there is now ambiguity about the relevance of political parties to individuals and the lives they lead.

There are inherent tensions in the relationships between political parties and the public. The desire for a greater degree of control and power over our own lives reflects the colonisation of the public realm by the values of consumerism and capitalism. As people demand greater autonomy through greater affluence, they transfer these concerns into other areas of their lives while struggling to find time and energy to do anything. In turn, antiquated and hierarchical public institutions restrict their capacity to actualise their opinions

and take up too much of their precious time, so they seek alternative ways of expressing their interests. Meanwhile, ambiguity about what it means to be political and the lack of confidence in the role of politics and politicians heightens confusion about what participation achieves. If public institutions cannot be trusted to achieve their stated aims and people feel less deferential to, or even interest in, political parties, then the public realm becomes an arena of uncertainty. This compounds the sense of a lack of control or influence in what can be achieved by participation. This reflects how partisan political engagement has come to be seen not as an empowering but instead as a disconcerting experience.

The contrast with being a member of a single-issue pressure group, or even several, is clear. These organisations have learnt how, in the marketplace of idealism, to make membership a meaningful and practical expression of concern which fits into contemporary lifestyles. It is easy to see why many people feel disengaged from political structures and turn to more 'authentic' expressions of their views through single-issue campaign groups and organisations not weighed down with formal and long-winded ways of working. In contemporary Britain, it is much easier to publicly state you are a member of Amnesty International than of a political party. As the Power Inquiry reported:

> *Although many activists lament the time and effort sometimes involved in their work and may, on occasion, feel they are unfairly perceived as do-gooders or extremists, there is no sense, on the whole, that their politics is undertaken in the face of public indifference or hostility.*[57]

These differing pressures drive the perceptions which underpin how people respond to political parties. They merge and interact with each other to further a sense of futility within the public realm about partisan activism. Thus a concern for greater self-authorship jars with the traditional structures of party involvement and encourages individuals to seek alternative ways of securing social change. At the

same time the cynicism about the capacity of politics to achieve social change rather than be self-serving adds to a sense of uselessness about engagement in the first place, further widening the gap between high principle and the gritty and necessary compromises of governance.

There is now, partially, a self-fulfilling prophecy within politics where expectations are low and possibly cynical, so fewer people participate, which lowers the capacity of political parties to organise to achieve their aims. As we have a diminishing interest in working together through formal political structures to achieve shared interests, we seek alternatives through social and individual activism, often operating on the outskirts of the public realm or increasingly through the private sphere. As a result, our social realm is expanding as our public realm contracts. This damages progressive politics which thrives in a public realm where individuals come together to share mutual concerns and act collectively as well as individually to resolve them.

For a progressive political movement, these trends undermine our capacity to achieve our vision of the good society. Specifically, in challenging the role of political parties as the vehicle by which progressive values are both campaigned for and governed through, these trends present a serious challenge to Labour. If we are to reaffirm and renew the role of a progressive political movement in modern Britain we must recognise these challenges and look at how to address them as we adapt to modernity.

3. Serving a cause, serving a community

Labour needs to reaffirm its importance to those with progressive concerns in contemporary Britain. It must renew its role as a political party which serves a cause and a political movement which serves a community. In a society antagonised by 'political' activities, but still 'political' in its concerns, Labour must advocate its role as the way to implement a progressive agenda in government and be an agency for progressive causes in every neighbourhood.

To meet the challenge of a society more interested in politics than politicians, we must become an outward-looking movement capable of building relationships with people who share our values but not our party. The persistence of 'we' politicos campaigning within Britain reveals how there is still a yearning for organisations which can bring people together in pursuit of shared objectives. For too long our relationship with the public has been a monologue, informing them about our policies and politics. In an era of self-authorship, we must engage in dialogues with the communities we serve about the progressive responses to contemporary society.

The purpose of political parties: serving a cause

At critical points in our electoral history we have been a cause for the public as much as for our members. Whether in the postwar era which elected the Atlee government to deliver the welfare state or 1994–1997 as New Labour prepared to end 18 years of Conservative

rule, the Labour Party was the bearer of the aspirations of the British public for a different kind of society. This gave a sense of purpose to voting Labour and motivated members across the country. Now in office, Labour must continue to give voice to the progressive aspirations which define its mission. In this third term we cannot allow our advocacy of the good society, which drives our policies, to be hidden behind the legislative mechanics of office. We must convince people that to be Labour is to serve a cause – social justice. Today, when political activity thrives as long as it is not identified as political, we practising politicians must show how holding political views enhances rather than demeans 'political' activity and turn the growth in social activist groups into a complementary activity rather than a challenge to us.

Political leadership has never been simply about being a legislative technician and political parties are more than election machines. Every political movement has its roots in the struggle of founder members to change society, in a shared campaign to gain democratic power not just to change governments but to change lives. For most, membership of a political party is motivated by a passionate concern for how the world could be; they participate in political activities from a mutual sense of hope that together they can make a difference. In turn members select candidates who can lead both their campaigning activities and governing capabilities. Communicating the scale of a progressive vision of the good society and securing support for progressive policies are interlinked functions of Labour. At their best, our political leaders have been able to do this, using their words and actions to bridge the divide between where society is and where their values demand society should be.

In this centenary year of the Parliamentary Labour Party, we must reflect on our history to see the lessons we can learn for our future. In April 1914, Keir Hardie spoke on the twenty-first anniversary of the founding of the Independent Labour Party to define Labour's vision as a society in which 'the sunshine of socialism and human freedom break forth upon our land'.[58] He identified how, in 21 years, the Labour Party had already created a 'kindlier social atmosphere' as it

had changed attitudes towards poverty in Victorian Britain. Hardie argued that the challenge ahead was to build on these gains as they campaigned to elect Labour MPs to secure the party's vision of the good society. Hardie emphasised that the party had to respond progressively to the potential of scientific advances such as X-ray and Marconi's telephony, the untapped talent in women and the need to defeat the ideas of eugenics.

Hardie's speech reflects the three requirements the party should make of its political leaders asserting Labour's cause. First, he offered a comprehensive vision of the good society rather than solely a menu of grievances. This breadth of what Labour needed to address reflects the difference between offering a political opinion and fashioning a political programme. Hardie showed that Labour was a party capable of governing by asserting not only how the world should be, but also by understanding how to achieve it. For Hardie, the impact the Labour movement was already having as a campaigning force was not enough – he understood that Labour had to be in government to achieve our vision of the good society.

Second, Hardie identified and capitalised on the possibilities inherent in society for the benefit of all. Progressives seek not to hold the world as it is but to consciously take advantage of innovations of modern life in pursuit of social justice. Labour should always be at home in the future, willing to address the difficult and controversial issues which affect our society now and in the years ahead. In our contemporary age, understanding the challenges of modernity – whether genetic advances, the digital divide or environmental sustainability – and framing a progressive response to these issues is vital to ensuring the continuing relevance of our movement to the people we seek to serve. Nine years into office this need to constantly challenge ourselves and our vision of how the future will unfold against the rubric of our timeless concern for social justice is no less pressing.

Finally, Hardie's speech, and indeed his political career, shows how progressive concerns are articulated not only through party political activity. It is no coincidence that Hardie was a central actor in the

Temperance Movement, women's suffrage campaigns and the Ayrshire Miners' Union. He understood that being active in working for individual social causes was also part of advocating for progressive values and asserting the importance of progressive party political engagement. His lifework was a combination of social and political activism in both word and deed and should still be our template for how to secure social change in contemporary society.

This symbiotic relationship has been corroded in recent decades, but is embedded in the history of our party. Indeed, it is worth acknowledging that many Labour activists are still also passionate advocates of social campaigns in their communities. As one of the 250,000 people who marched in Edinburgh to make poverty history I did so not in my capacity as an elected politician but as part of a local community motivated by a concern for trade justice. On that day I was joined by members of my local party who like me also recognised that raising awareness by campaigning on this issue helped encourage our government to go further in pursuit of this progressive cause.

Yet increasingly such social advocacy has been one-way or seen as separate from progressive political campaigning, which denies its importance to our party and our members. Our engagement on these issues of public concern is not simply about gaining popular support. Our capacity as a movement to secure support for progressive causes and policies depends on our ability to interact with the public and make the case for social justice – to show how and where our concerns match theirs and so what political implications and actions are required. Social activists should rightly both challenge governments on their policy agenda and urge them to go further in pursuit of their objectives. Working together, politicians can use the public interest in these causes to champion actions, while social campaigners can help set agendas for change and refine policy implementation. Single-issue campaigns have made a real difference to society and our political environment is the richer for their involvement. As progressives who work either in social or political ways, we must start the conversations which can advance our ambitions for Britain. It will be vital to ending child poverty here that

progressives secure not just political but also social support among the British public for the necessary measures to achieve this. In short, to fashion and sustain a progressive consensus among the public which will ensure progressive politics and policies are those which are supported, demanded and implemented in the years ahead.

Yet it is also true that the good society is not defined by single issues. To achieve our vision, we need action across the piece. The idealism of single-issue pressure groups reflects one opinion of the priorities societies should set. In contrast, as Hardie's words show, political parties need to offer a holistic vision of how the world should be and proposals for this to be achieved. For those in pursuit of a more egalitarian society, there are difficult decisions to be made – whether on taxation, education or international issues. Government inevitably requires compromises and concessions – the choices made over how resources are used never being cost-free so it is vital that Labour has a political compass to judge whether the decisions made in office advance its political vision.

A failure to defend the case for political values and political parties would not just allow the degradation of politics to entertainment, it would diminish our capacity to make choices together about how we live. Previous Labour governments which failed to do this have suffered in office and subsequently from incoming right-wing administrations. As our opponents shifted public debate to the right, the space for the left to espouse progressive political values in Britain became restricted. Some have argued that in the past Labour governments failed to articulate how it is a 'bridge' between the aspirations individuals hold for their society and the necessary mechanisms of governance. David Marquand contends that the postwar settlement fell in the 1970s because of 'possessive individualism' and the failure of the Labour movement to match a 'philosophy of public intervention' with a 'notion of the public realm or the public good'. So, 'the hard choices that had to be made . . . became a battleground for predatory private interests instead of the instrument of a coherent public purpose'.[59]

A more contemporary example for progressives has been the

experience of the Democrats in the USA since the election of George Bush in 2000. Many of the substantial, if incremental, progressive policies from the Clinton era have been reversed by the Republican administration. This is the result of a party failing to build a consensus among the public about the importance of progressive measures to a good society. The Democrat experience also demonstrates the consequences of political opponents learning that very lesson. The Republicans have changed the terms of trade of American politics, defining the role of government so that American progressives have to respond to their agenda and defend, rather than advance, a concern for social justice. So, too, they have used this to draw together a diverse range of local social activists across America into their organisation, reaching out and making the case to these groups for how their social ideals are connected to their political agenda. Over the course of recent years, the Republicans have built a coalition in the broader base of American society between faith groups, 'soccer moms' and business leaders, which has sustained both their electoral and cultural advantage. In a recent speech, Karl Rove, the Deputy White House Chief of Staff, stated:

> *Our success springs from our ideas. . . . We are the party of ideas – and ideas have consequences. . . . For decades, Democrats were setting the agenda, the pace of change, and the visionary goals. Republicans were simply reacting to them. But times change – and this President and today's Republican Party are shaping history, not trying to stop it. Together we are articulating a compelling vision of a better world.*[60]

For both previous Labour governments and the Democrats, being voted out of office meant that the tangible progressive wins made by these administrations were overturned by their opponents because they had not made their political beliefs, which were at the heart of the case for their re-election and for the retention of these policies, clear to the electorate. Like Hardie, contemporary progressives must show how their passion for achieving a socially just society drives

their policy agenda. The foundation which our values offer to both our politics and our policies runs through everything progressives campaign for – and seek to do in office.

We need to find new ways to communicate our relevance to the public and our concern for social justice, looking to engage them in a continual dialogue about the choices we face as a nation. Yet we should always remember that democratic participation is a political act. We need to restore a sense of the importance of the competing visions of the good society that define political activities. Our concern for social justice provides both a sense of urgency and purpose to our policy agenda and a measure to test whether our policies are right. Yet we need to be more than confident in the correctness of our own intentions. Becoming a more prosperous, egalitarian and socially cohesive society requires progressive government not to act 'for' the public but rather to act 'with' them. Labour must recast government as an interactive network bringing together individuals, communities and institutions in shared pursuit of a progressive society. Debates about how we expand economic opportunity, improve public services and strengthen community are so contentious because they ask how to reshape the processes of governance to empower individuals and communities to reach progressive ends. To secure a more socially just society we have to form a new compact with the British people that empowers them as individual service users and citizens with a concern for their local communities, so that together we overturn the inequalities that still persist.

Developing a progressive consensus among the British public is inextricably linked to the need to renew the role of political parties. We can secure the support for progressive politics and the policies our ambitions require only by the public understanding our purpose. It is vital that as a party we debate the difficult choices involved in governance and the inevitable compromises, as we try to move Britain towards our vision of the good society. Labour cannot renew itself without a fundamental recognition of the task ahead and a willingness to debate with the public what this means for our future programme. Getting our message out about what motivates Labour is

vital to getting people to join us as both a party and a cause. Our mission is to respond progressively to the range of challenges we face and then to set out why the solution is not just to campaign but to be able to act in government.

The purpose of political parties: serving a community

If Labour is motivated by a concern for social justice, it is judged by how it works with the society it seeks to change. Labour has always recognised that its strength comes from both its mission and its members and the connection these make between the party and the people it seeks to assist. Clem Attlee once wrote:

> *During all my years in the movement, what has impressed me most is that its strength depends, not on the brilliance of individuals, but on the quality of the rank and file. It is the self-sacrifice, idealism, and character of the men and women who do the everyday work of the party up and down the country that makes me hopeful of the future. It is not the theories so much as the lives of those who advocate them which really count in the progress of a great movement.*[61]

We in the Labour movement understand this timeless truth. Thousands of activists up and down Britain put their time and energy into the party. The media may focus on the MPs, but the membership is the hidden powerhouse of our capacity to achieve our ambitions. Being a membership organisation roots us in our communities and is our strength both in our policy-making and in securing a progressive consensus among the British public. Our conversations as a party benefit from being grounded in the reality of people's lives, which allows us to advance the values which can underpin a progressive consensus. The Labour Party is more than a set of ideals; it exists to gain office to turn them into reality.

Over a decade ago modernisers like Tony Blair and Gordon Brown

argued that for Labour to overcome press hostility, we needed to have members at every school gate, in every pub and workplace arguing Labour's cause. Now we need a more contemporary understanding of how people receive information and are part of networks at a local level. Working with the people we wish to represent is integral to our existence. Continual dialogue offers us the antidote to the growing trend for politics to become an entertaining spectator support, devoid of consideration of the choices facing governments. Unless we engage with those who share our concerns but not our values, we allow single-issue groups to define themselves in opposition to political parties rather than as potential partners.

There will always be tensions between the Labour movement and campaigners, but building a culture of continual communication with social activists would give greater context to points of disagreement. Social campaign groups must be as accountable for their positions as governments are for their policies. When the reasons for differences are not aired, activists on both sides are frustrated. Social campaigners say politicians do not listen, while political activists feel that campaigners are not held accountable for their demands. The solution is to have more opportunity for discussion, so that each group gains a better understanding of the circumstances in which they act. This would allow campaigners to engage with political parties in a shared space of mutual interests and co-organisers rather than as rivals for the attention of the public.

We must be clear that progressive ambitions cannot be achieved without a political organisation which can act alongside social organisations to frame an agenda for government in pursuit of social justice. As Hardie understood, social justice requires both a social conscience and political action to be achieved. Creating new ways for the Labour movement to engage social activism groups is about working together to find points of reference on which each side can agree. It gives political parties the opportunity, after establishing this initial common ground, to show how other aspects of our work appeal to the same progressive instincts. Instead of being unsettled by the growth in social activism, we should celebrate this interest in

aspects of our vision of the good society. We now have to find ways to draw the energy for social justice these concerns represent into a progressive consensus.

Focusing on the twin ambitions of Labour – its desire to serve both cause and community – gives a greater clarity to the benefit Labour as a political party brings to the British public realm. Labour wants to govern because we are driven by a shared belief that the world is changeable; if we are given a democratic mandate, in partnership with the public we can put social justice, social solidarity and equality at the heart of our society. We look at contemporary society through the prism of our worldview and see the progressive challenges which we wish to tackle. While single-issue groups are vital to the democratic process, securing a more socially just Britain involves more than the articulation of a collection of individual concerns. It needs a cohesive and coherent plan of action that can be delivered only in government. This needs political leadership to take the necessary and hard choices about how the nation's resources are used to achieve a more egalitarian Britain and motivate a political movement that can secure the electoral mandate for such an agenda.

Labour must find new ways of engaging with the public to fulfil its second ambition – serving the community. As a progressive party, we must work with every individual community and neighbourhood. This is not just a question of electoral success. Obtaining a consensus to sustain progressive policies, whether Labour is in office or not, requires a cohort of people across the country who can speak up for their benefits. To achieve this, Labour has to be a grassroots organisation as well as a political philosophy. Working with the people we want to represent offers an opportunity to learn from each other in seeking progressive social change. A political movement must be as much about the people it serves as its principles if it is to be both effective and meaningful. Labour must serve both a cause and a community; the people we work with ground our vision in the present, the principles we hold offer us hope for the future.

4. How soon is now?

Making renewal happen

If we are clear in our value to the British people, then we must be confident in our ability to adapt to achieve these aims. This pamphlet is not just an analysis of the problems politicians and political parties face, but a call to arms for every Labour member and sympathiser of progressive politics to ask what they can do to help renew the role of the party in today's Britain. While many of the pressures identified in this pamphlet as bearing down on politics and the public realm are beyond the sphere of influence of the Labour movement alone, others are not. The corrosive factors that eat away at public trust in politicians are not insurmountable. Our understanding of the scale of the problems facing those who wish to renew participation in the public realm should not dull our resolve to change those ways of doing politics that are within our reach. Indeed, our failure to address these issues would risk not only the future success of the Labour Party but also of progressive ideals across British society.

This means looking at new ways of interacting with those who share our progressive concerns and asking how best to structure our work at both local and national levels to facilitate their involvement. This is a matter of evolution not revolution. Already across the UK many local parties have been innovative and creative in beginning to reform their working practices. Our challenge now is to build and expand on these approaches in a way which reconnects Labour to the

people of Britain and so renews its role as their progressive political movement.

The importance of undergoing such a process of renewal while in office cannot be underestimated. Traditionally political parties change their way of working with the public only after a 'near death' experience of losing office and substantial levels of support. Renewal tends to be part of the process of reconstitution of support rather than part of maintaining a healthy and vibrant political movement. For both Labour in 1992 after having lost a fourth election and the Republican Party in America after they lost the popular vote, it was defeat which precipitated a period of party renewal and the process of reorganisation that was integral to the revival in their electoral fortunes.

This is a pressing issue for Labour as it faces the uncharted territory of a third term and the possibility of securing a fourth. Never before has Labour sustained such a period of office and such success brings considerable risks. As incumbents we are more than ever dependent on our supporters to help build and sustain a progressive consensus among the public for our actions in office. The experience of our counterparts in other nations and indeed our own history shows that without both a political and a social voice for social justice out in the country as well as in government our opponents can quickly unpick any progressive gains made.

Being clear about our mission to serve both a cause and the communities we represent alone is not enough to achieve these goals. For too long, the question of party renewal has been seen either as a matter only of national change, whether in our people, procedures or political communications. This diminishes the true scale of the change required, reducing the complex social and cultural issues identified in this pamphlet to matters of presentation or personalities. Let us have no illusions about the difficulties we face. There is no simple 'magic bullet' which can be used, no list of rule changes or organisational template which can be applied with immediate effect to reconnect the progressive instincts of the British public to our party. This will require a deeper and more fundamental realignment

of our cultural and organisational practices to meet the challenges of the world we live in now.

Those who think otherwise avoid accountability for the future of our party. It is right we ask of our national leadership what is being done to secure Labour's future, but wrong if in doing so we absolve the rest of our movement from responsibility for reconnecting our party with the people it seeks to serve. As Robin Cook once argued, we should not see renewal as purely the 'business of the man at the top' but as a task to which all those with progressive ideals must contribute for it to be successful.[62] Thus, the process of renewing our movement must not focus solely on questions of our constitution or national leadership, but also ask how best to change our culture so that party activism is a meaningful and worthwhile experience for all. Being part of Labour's work should be more than a leaflet round for Sunday afternoons; it must be how British progressive politics and policies are created and communicated.

We are family? The Labour movement and British progressive politics

When asked about political parties most people tend to think in terms of those in the public eye. Elected representatives, politicians, councillors and regional representatives play a vital role in communicating our vision and acting in office or opposition to get our policies in place. It is right that they should be at the forefront of both setting out our vision and seeking innovative ways to engage the public in political concerns and on the ground. Yet achieving a progressive Britain or renewing the role of our movement requires a genuine partnership with the public forged not just by those elected to represent Labour but by everyone who shares our values. Our members are one of the most important assets we have to achieve this both as a campaigning and a policy-making organisation. They are not just cheerleaders; they are the lifeblood of our movement. They make our case on the doorstep, in the town hall or at the school gates. The everyday experiences and connections into communities across the country they can bring to our work root our party and our policies.

However, while we must uphold the importance of membership to our party, renewal must be about more than recruitment or retention. We should recognise that our strength as a movement lies not just in our people but our reach. In a contemporary society, which is politically interested but party-political phobic, our success must be judged by how we bridge that gap and reaffirm our role as agent for progressive change among the British public. Against this test then our challenge is not simply to increase the numbers of people willing to join our party but the greater charge of being the focal point for securing social change in the minds of all those within British society with progressive ideals.

We can see the scale of this challenge just by looking at our links within the wider Labour movement. The historic relationship with the trade union movement has supported and sustained the party financially since its inception and many of the progressive gains in our society have come from their work. From campaigning for the introduction of the weekend to the minimum wage and equal pay, unions have played a vital role in improving our society. Today many trade union activists continue to be campaigners for social justice in their communities, yet increasingly these activities are seen as separate from the Labour Party rather than shared. In the same way other local progressive movements such as the cooperative movement and the Fabian Society, which were fundamental to the creation of the party, are now often parallel rather than partner agencies. This isolation of our local Labour parties from such sister organisations reflects the need to ask what it is about our campaigns and our culture which means that even those closest to us are less involved in our activities than ever before. The challenge to inspire and engage the British public in pursuit of social justice requires us to turn outwards and draw all those who share our values but not our party into our work. This principle is true both of those who are members of the wider progressive political movement and those who seek progressive social change.

A community hub: looking outwards not inwards

Finding new ways to work which can allow us to reconnect with progressives across Britain is both a cultural and organisational imperative. We must seek to reframe ourselves not as a closed network bound through membership alone but instead an open and inclusive movement which offers thinking space to progressives across Britain. To do this, we have to find new ways of ensuring Labour is a focal point for its local communities, rooting the party in every locality and informing and encouraging support for progressive politics and policies among the populace – in short, a 'hub' for community concerns and action grounded in a concern for social justice.

As a starting point local Labour parties and their affiliates could join together to host shared discussions with social activism groups. This would recognise the importance of local party activists in their own right in their own communities. There is a strong tradition of speaker meetings within our party, but we often expect the speaker to come to us rather than to go to them. While MPs and councillors may have extensive contact with social activist groups, rarely do political parties themselves seek to be a forum in which social concerns can be aired and positions determined. So, too, groups may lobby elected representatives at election time, but most limit their engagement with local political parties to leaflets which languish in CLP correspondence files.

Political activism is not a competitor to social activism but its collaborator; there are many activist groups whose work accords with progressive principles. Creating opportunities for shared discussion would show that one can be both a social and political activist. It would also develop a culture in which those with progressive concerns would look to the local Labour Party to give direction and focus to political action on their issues. If Labour is to do this, we need to do more than acknowledge our shared interest in particular progressive concerns.

Our discussion forums must be open and accessible to social

campaigners and non-hierarchical; it is not a case of asking them to address our general committees (GCs) but setting out new arenas on neutral ground to build networks between political and social concerns. This could be done in a number of ways. For example, at present we restrict our meetings to members. We could separate out the necessary party business from the discussions of policy and local issues and open the latter to the general public. We often have our meetings in places which are not necessarily accessible to our community. Instead we need to explore starting communication networks through workplaces, in local sports clubs or community centres, whether through public meetings or less formal ways of instigating discussions.

These new forums for debate will be most attractive to those who already participate in collective social activism – the 'we' politicos. To reach out to a greater section of the public we must use a variety of methods as there can be no 'one size fits all' response. We must engage with people across the country, making the case for progressive politics and policies to the public whether they are consciously politically engaged or not. To assist this, Ed Miliband[63] has argued that Labour could develop small 'users groups' for people with particular concerns. Taking this point forward, these could be groups such as local healthcare users, parents or young adults. Developing ways of creating smaller, less formal networks could also encourage those who feel beleaguered by formal meetings.

There is also great scope for communications technology to offer new ways for us to open up our party activities. Already, Stalybridge and Hyde CLP is undertaking a pioneering project which will focus on online community engagement and building support for the Labour Party through the internet, and David Lammy MP has begun experimenting with podcasting. The development of specialist policy networks online through the national Labour Party website, which cover subject areas including health and education, also offers an innovative way of involving members into our policy discussions. These examples reflect how the party has already begun to experiment in this way but we need to build on these pilot schemes

and go further. The party could also use the internet, chat rooms, text message technology, digital television and blogs to help facilitate discussions for those who cannot make meetings or who prefer to communicate with the party online.

These innovations would allow us to offer forums both for particular policy matters and for greater and more immediate interaction with the public. The constantly falling costs and greater access to these technologies means that they are increasingly a common part of modern living and that participation in the production of any digital content is no longer an expensive and complicated matter. This represents a great opportunity for us to empower local members so that again alongside national forums these technologies could be used locally as well. Being clever about how we use advances in modern technology is not the only way in which we will renew our relationship with the public, but in being creative about the process of party renewal we need to recognise the potential offered by modern technology to take Labour's case out into local communities.

Continual communication: campaigning and consensus building

The 2005 election showed that members of campaign organisations which do not share our progressive values have recognised the difference their funding and activism can make during election times. The 'Vote-OK' campaign, which organised pro-foxhunting supporters, claims to have been responsible for the loss of 29 Labour seats and stated:

> *3.4 million leaflets were delivered, 2.1 million envelopes hand-addressed, 55,000 posters erected and 170,000 campaigning man hours provided in a nationally co-ordinated initiative.*[64]

How much of a difference this made can be disputed. However, as groups such as this state their intention to continue to try and secure the election of pro-hunting MPs at the next election, this represents a

new twist in the relationship between those campaigning for social change and political parties.

This approach by social activists to political engagement echoes the so-called '527' organisations which were created in America in the run-up to the 2004 presidential elections such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and MoveOn.org.[65] These officially non-partisan aligned organisations poured money into motivating those who were not members of political parties into campaigning for particular candidates and parties during the election because they saw it as a means to securing their own social agenda. The evidence suggests that in the years ahead social activism groups that do not connect with the political process could find their opponents that do securing a greater influence. So, setting up new forums for discussion and debate about political issues of shared concern are critical to both their influence and our ability to deliver progressive policies in office. We need to ensure such discussions do not ebb and flow with elections but instead are a core part of our political culture.

Likewise, between elections we must seek new ways of campaigning and communicating with those who hold political views but do not participate in collective forms of political discussion. This is not a difficulty restricted to the work of political parties; many social campaign groups have different 'levels' of engagement for members. These can range from 'cheque-book' membership through email campaigns to those who run local activist groups. These organisations seek to move their supporters through these different stages, hoping to make them more active and more involved in securing the ambitions of the campaign. Yet, each form of activity is considered equally valid and effort is put into increasing each form as a benefit to the organisation.

In contrast, participation in Labour Party campaigns has sometimes been cast on an 'all or nothing' basis: people must become members immediately, then attend every GC, deliver 500 leaflets every weekend and help in every by-election in the country. Consequently, membership can seem overwhelming for those who may have a passing interest in political issues but do not feel ready to

commit to a high level of activism. Labour can learn from the 'incremental' approach and ask how to interact with those who prefer to act personally – the 'me' politicos – rather than collectively.

From becoming a source of information about progressive political issues to offering a conduit to express support for action, the Labour Party can reach out to those who share progressive concerns to help reaffirm our role as the nation's progressive political party. Whether using surveys, online consultations or personalised visits to discuss issues, there is scope for adjusting our campaigning activities to take account of the desire for self-authorship. We need to look at ways in which the party could offer opportunities for individuals as well as GCs to contribute to party discussions and winning elections.

Moment-related learning: tomorrow's political education

The third interconnected aspect of engaging with the public is to understand how people wish to get information about political concerns. This means finding ways of personalising how and when information is communicated to individuals and communities in a manner which reflects what they want to know. In a multi-channel world we have to tailor our message to the people we wish to engage rather than broadcasting what we think matters.

Acting as an information broker could also help in building relationships with people who do not want to participate in politics but who, as the evidence suggests, share a concern for political issues. Political education has long been used by local Labour parties, but was too often confined to our own members. Tackling the disjuncture between a concern for political issues and a distaste for politics requires us to reach out and make the case for political action as a valuable activity in itself. Already many local parties and MPs experiment with such 'moment-related' learning, engaging people at a time and on a matter of concern to them. Whether responding to debates about pensions initiated by the Turner Report or addressing those with a particular interest in international development, Labour needs to understand how the public wishes to access information about political concerns.

Just as with our continual campaigning activities, here also there is scope for the party to use modern technology to provide both greater content and interactivity in its political education. The party is already piloting using the internet and personal web pages to allow people to customise the information they receive from the party. We could also have an online in-depth library of policy papers and arguments which is maintained by the national party and accessible to all linked to our forums for engagement and discussion on political issues. Such a reference collection need not be a set of dry policy documents or statistical data. It could also be a vital resource about the party's history and values, helping to assert our cause as well as the mechanics of our policies. We should also make more use of elected representatives in offering informal arenas such as coffee mornings, book groups or question and answer sessions, again looking at the potential for technology to open up access to their representatives. These different methods offer vital ways in which to make connections between issues of concern and the need for political responses.

Agents not administrators: the future of Labour Party staff

If we recognise the need to rethink how we work to bring people into our movement we need to support this process of renewal with a change in how we work as a professional party. If we want our elected representatives to be both national and local legislators as well as advocates for Labour in our communities then they need professional assistance on the ground to ensure they are able to fulfil both tasks. For many MPs and councillors, the falling activism of party members means they are often the primary instigators and executors of Labour's local campaigning. Austin Mitchell has described how the role that MPs play in their CLPs now is akin to being Beau Geste, propping up dead soldiers on the battlements and running around firing their rifles hoping the opposition won't notice how few colleagues you have left.[66] If we wish to be able to reach out and draw the public into our work we need to increase our capacity at a local

level to support and sustain party activities, rather than hoping either volunteers with jobs, children and social lives or time-challenged MPs and councillors alone can manage it all.

This means asking how best to use our party workers. Too often we lose the skills and knowledge our staff build up and find resources stretched too thinly across our regions. While some local CLPs and borough parties contribute to the cost of staff, we need to coordinate how this is funded and managed so that the benefits of these people are fully realised and focused where they will make the most difference. Those staff we do retain can sometimes find themselves becoming reluctant administrators for local parties, taking minutes or mediating between differing factions rather than inspiring and organising activity which supports Labour's values.

The importance of how we use our professional staff resources is a lesson we can learn not least from our opponents. While the Conservatives were in power, their party was supported by a network of paid professional agents who organised the work of their members on the ground. These individuals helped to both ensure activity at a local level to make the Conservatives a strong presence and ease the administrative burden from members. It can be argued that the loss of this network and the resulting concentration of work in Tory strongholds contributed to their electoral decline. We know too from our own experiences that in areas where Labour has lost support locally often it is paid staff who have made a critical difference in our fortunes. They have been able to organise activity over a lengthy period of time which has been critical to restoring Labour's support base.

Making best use of our staff to support Labour's work requires greater clarity over the value that they provide. Whether in building up links with local affiliated activists and progressive social campaign groups to producing and providing campaign materials, organisers are best used not in servicing bureaucratic obligations but in bringing focus to activism. The growing importance of using modern communications in the years to come for the party also means our staff will need training in a greater level of technological ability than

ever before. We need to ensure those in the field can help local party members and supporters use these advances so that the services provided are relevant and accessible to the local population for whom they are intended.

Of course, moving towards a cadre of paid professional staff based in the localities they serve to support the work of our CLPs would cost money; however, it would help Labour in serving both a cause and the communities it represents. Our funding is always limited, meaning we need to ask how best to use the resources we have to secure the kind of connection we want with the British public. We spent over £15 million on campaigning at the last election, and a further £23 million on our national running costs, yet we know turnout and participation in our activities at both local and national levels continues to decline.[67] Indeed, while our membership has almost halved since the 1980s, our spending has almost trebled.[68] These figures reflect why we need to rebalance the focus of our party resources away from national communications and advertising campaigns towards activities that engage the public at a local level. In making the case for this transfer of resources we can look to the evidence from America of the way in which national campaigns dominated by television advertising impact on the capacity of political parties to reach out to the public.

Developing such a network of organisers and agents has already begun and the trainee organiser scheme has been a welcome move. To improve our capacity to reorganise our working arrangements in this way, we now need to look again at how best to recruit and retain staff across the UK who can then help support the work of volunteers on the ground. We also need to match this with a devolved party structure that can ensure staff are supported in their work in our localities in their regions, helping to spread good practice across the party and connect our local activism with our national agenda.

Rights and responsibilities: operating principles for internal renewal

We must not restrict our capacity to meet the challenges we face

through a lack of flexibility about how we achieve our aims. Too often party renewal has been seen as code for arguments about the role of contemporary motions or GCs, with scant regard being given to how any reform or tradition actually helps us as a party achieve our objectives in the world in which we live now. If we accept the importance of developing a more interactive relationship with the public, we must encourage each locality to experiment in how best to make this happen. What works in inner London will not necessarily be as effective in the Outer Hebrides, some areas may find informal speaker meetings more effective than blogs or messageboards and some may choose to focus on local campaigns in how they use their time to make the case for Labour. To give direction to this process we need to set out the two key operating principles for internal renewal. First, we need to offer the freedom and flexibility that inspires innovation in Labour's ability to reach out to communities across different localities. Second, we must retain the confidence of all of the importance of our membership by recognising the responsibility they hold for the future direction of the party.

We need more flexibility in our internal bureaucracy precisely to avoid wasting the contribution our members can make. It is vital that party structures should assist rather than disable activism. There will always be administrative concerns for local parties and the need to create effective campaign machinery, but most members join to influence policy and to discuss how to achieve our vision of the good society. The plethora of committees we ask local parties to operate has created a culture which can often be exclusionary rather than inclusive, demanding that members be expert in standing orders and constitutional regulations rather than be allowed to come together to campaign for their common beliefs.

Some CLPs have already experimented with flatter structures which involve less distinction between branches, local government committees and CLPs, to help free up time for other party activity as well as reducing the necessary administration. We could also use modern technology for easier administration and communication, developing member-only websites to share information about local

and national activities. In making party activities a welcoming and friendly experience, too, we should also expand on mentoring, training and 'buddying' programmes to ensure new and lapsed members are encouraged to participate in party activities. In asking our CLPs to rise to the challenge of renewal, they must be responsible for finding what works for them rather than imposing a nationally determined 'one size fits all' solution. This in turn helps us draw on the expertise of our activists both within and outside the party in deciding how best to use their time in pursuing progressive politics.

We can also use these operating principles in looking at some of the other functions currently undertaken by local Labour parties. We must be clear that while we wish to engage a broader range of individuals and communities in Labour's work, party members are the final decision-making body. Yet we should show how the flexibility that would enable us to open up our work to those with progressive views currently outside the party enhances rather than diminishes the importance of party membership. This is because it brings to the fore their role as the body which has the responsibility for arbitrating between the contributions these non-party organisations and individuals can make to our work. This is particularly vital in asking how both the selection of representatives and our policy-making process can contribute to the renewal of our party.

The introduction of all-women shortlists reflects Labour's intention to be a party which advances equality in both word and deed, but we need to do more – in particular as we build on the work being done to increase the numbers of women representatives we have we must also look at how to increase representation from people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, those with disabilities and those under the age of 40. This recognises that our progressive values will thrive in a democracy in which people from all walks of life participate in helping us move towards our ambition of a more egalitarian society. While some of the measures already discussed will help to draw those who are currently underrepresented into our work who can then be encouraged to stand, we cannot wait for individuals

to come to us, and we should extend fast-track and mentoring schemes for those from currently underrepresented backgrounds in the party as a way of tackling these issues.

We must take the opportunity presented by selections for local representatives to engage residents in debating and discussing the important role politicians can play in their lives. It is vital that any local candidate for our party is capable of not just making the case for Labour to existing members, but also more widely within their communities. Some have suggested looking at the model of primaries used in other countries to select these local candidates. They argue that such indicative ballots could offer the opportunity for parties to reflect on which local candidates are best equipped to reach out and secure support for Labour. However, others have rightly raised concerns that the potential costs of such an approach could be prohibitive for candidates and distort the capacity for any party member regardless of income to run for selection for Labour. While such debates will no doubt continue, it is vital that in using any innovative methods in future selection procedures for our local candidates we continue to uphold the unique role and responsibility of our party's membership. It should be for party members to have the decisive voice in choosing who best to represent Labour.

The same operating principles can be applied to our policy-making process. We have rightly experimented with more flexible policy-making practices in recent years. Indeed, we should not be nostalgic for our previous structures which did little to engage ordinary members, let alone the British public, in determining the policy of the Labour Party. The difficulty has always been to create processes which can involve and engage party members while also ensuring the policy produced could both stand up to public scrutiny and be implemented. Already outside agencies can contribute submissions to our policy-making process, but at present few do. Given their role as arbiters of policy, we need to challenge our activists to be accountable for making the links with their communities that can bridge this gap between our party and our public. We need to be rooted across all the communities we seek to

serve, listening and responding to their concerns and asking ourselves how our policy-making helps us meet this obligation. This can only benefit our work as the quality of our debates is enhanced by the involvement of a range of perspectives. In turn participation in such a process by such groups can help improve understanding both of our position and of the impact of our proposals.

The focus on a full week of party conference can have the effect of excluding those with jobs and families from participating in our debates. If we give our local parties more freedom to innovate in how they involve communities in progressive politics, we should be more flexible ourselves. Proposals for a three-day conference and greater use of regional debates need to be considered as we seek a policy-making structure that could more easily fit with the pressures of modern life. Making the Partnership into Power process more flexible to encourage more contributions also raises the importance of our members. As the people holding final responsibility for party policy they are accountable for the relationship between the end result and the public we seek to serve. As with our selection processes, using consultations and campaigns can help to indicate support for policy and so help inform the decisions that members ultimately make on our future direction as a party.

Such an approach should not be limited to our national policy process. Community links are also critical to improving the quality of our local policy-making and manifestos. As we look to engage with local social activism groups we should also use local party members to arbitrate between these competing demands in determining the activities of the Labour movement in their area – whether they are in office or opposition.

In each aspect of our party's activities – our bureaucracy, selections and policy-making – turning our gaze from structures to outcomes helps us identify what adaptations will help the renewal of the Labour Party. Above all we need to ensure our bureaucracy does not crowd out our politics. Setting out these operating principles helps guide us in this process because it shows how innovation and flexibility in our working practices can strengthen the role of members in our

movement by bringing their obligations to the fore. To renew the party we must both uphold the distinction between membership and support for our party and be willing to innovate on the ground in how we work with those both inside and outside our movement. Together these principles confirm the role of our members and challenge each of us to do more to engage the public in supporting social justice.

Funding the good fight: financial support

It would not be possible to discuss the future of political parties without asking how best to fund our activities. While two out of five people have donated money or paid a membership fee to a charity or campaigning organisation, only one in 20 has paid to join a political party or donated money to one.[69] This has, of course, been an issue recently with concerns about the nature of donations to political parties and discussions about state funding. Running a modern political party which can put its case for election and support a membership is expensive. As a voluntary organisation, Labour relies on the goodwill of its members to get most of its work done, on their willingness to both contribute to the cost of producing campaign materials and to spend time delivering them.

It would be inappropriate to speculate on detailed proposals for party funding that will be put forward by the forthcoming review by Sir Hayden Philips. However, the issues that have come to the fore so far in the review show how as a country we cannot avoid the need for action to secure greater clarity around public and private funding for political parties and the regulation of their financing at local and national levels. With this in mind there are a number of key principles which should inform Labour's approach to this issue. The concerns about donations to political parties reflect the need for greater controls over the levels of personal donations. As Leader of the Commons, Jack Straw has argued it is right that donations are part of the funding of any political party and should remain so in the future. The donations given to any political or social organisation are a reflection of the support that they have among the people they serve

and are an important aspect of being a public, as opposed to private, organisation. Those who give donations should be respected as people who seek to support the democratic process and, as political parties are a vital and integral part of our public realm, it is right that we seek to value rather than diminish this practice.

We must also ensure that any moves towards state funding respect the role that membership and affiliated organisations play in the Labour movement. We should seek clear distinctions between those who give donations to political parties as private individuals and those organisations which represent a membership body that chooses to contribute collectively. Above all we must make sure any changes in the financing of the Labour movement must not compromise the role of trade unions as a critical link between working people and our party.

It is not just the emphasis on national advertising campaigns that should be taken into account in asking how political party finances should be organised to promote good democratic practices. One of the critical costs facing any political party during a campaign comes from advertising and in particular the high cost of billboards. Regulating this aspect of campaign expenditure would shift our focus from images to ideas. This would then encourage political parties to use more interactive methods of communicating their message which would in turn benefit the public realm. When considering the case for state funding and the cost of running a political party in our modern democracy, attention should also be given to the level of individual donations and spending on campaigning, not just during elections but throughout the year. The change in political communication from being a matter for the four weeks before polling day to a continual conversation means consideration must be given to deciding the appropriate levels of expenditure by political parties throughout each parliamentary cycle.

These issues must also be seen in a local as well as a national context. There is growing evidence from the 2005 election that money was targeted locally at marginal seats by the Conservative Party prior to the election. The *Guardian*[70] has reported the work of former

Labour MP Peter Bradley in identifying how in some constituencies Conservative candidates outspent Labour candidates by a ratio of 12 to one. A commercial brokerage organisation, Bearwood Corporate Services, run by the former Tory treasurer Lord Michael Ashcroft, donated £844,547 to Tory marginals, with sums of up to £42,333 in the case of Hammersmith and Fulham.

This was not a practice confined to one particular political party or to election campaigns. Hornsey and Wood Green was a key Liberal Democrat target for the 2005 election. In the months prior to the election a huge volume of literature was distributed across the constituency in support of their candidate Lynne Featherstone, who is now the MP. The Electoral Commission register of donations shows how between 2001 and the 2005 election Ms Featherstone personally donated nearly £62,000 to the Haringey Liberal Democrats in direct financial donations and payments for staff. Even if the general public are less engaged in political activity, political parties themselves are spending more time, and money, than ever before trying to convince them to do otherwise. Such examples illustrate the need to ensure appropriate limits on expenditure of political parties are set at both national and local levels.

Resolving how best to deal with these issues is not going to be easy or without political controversy. Yet it is increasingly clear that the financial transactions of political parties are now contributing to the ways that the public engage in political concerns. The danger we face now is that if we are not able to restore confidence in the way that political parties are funded then confidence in all our activities will be undermined. Looking for cross-party consensus will help bring that trust but, ultimately, Labour should be willing to make the case for action on these issues as a way of upholding public trust in the political process.

The ideas put forward in this chapter reflect the scale of the challenge facing Labour in the months and years ahead as it seeks to renew its purpose in British politics. Yet it is important to recognise that we are not the only political party seeking to renew our relationship with the

public. The Conservatives have also begun to recognise the need to develop a more outward-looking approach to engaging the public, most recently agreeing to involve 'outsiders' in the selection process and looking at the introduction of primaries for candidates.[71]

Thus, this pamphlet has set out the context in which all political parties now find themselves, but what we do next is up to Labour as a party. If we recognise the difficulties facing all political parties in asserting their relevance to contemporary Britons, we should also acknowledge the potential opportunities for advancing our own politics. While people still express concern for political issues, the need for political parties that can marshal these ideas into a coherent agenda for government endures. However, the progressive ambitions we have for Britain will not be served by a repackaged Conservative Party that views these matters as part of a marketing exercise rather than a question of political substance. Labour must develop its way of responding to these issues that can secure and sustain its role as the party which serves social justice and a movement which serves every community across our nation.

The role of local party members in building links with progressive social activists and facilitating discussions between them and political representatives cannot be underestimated. Frankly, it will be our members who will determine whether any new ways of engaging the wider public are successful in renewing the movement. Top-down reform may miss the vital contribution our grassroots members have to offer in using their local knowledge – as already acknowledged, what may work for one CLP in one area could be inappropriate or even counterproductive in others. However, such changes are neither incidental nor optional to the future of the Labour Party. The party should therefore now prioritise this work and set out a clear timetable for progress in tackling these issues. Every CLP should be asked to outline how it intends to meet the challenge of renewal, working in partnership with our regional parties and professional staff to identify how we can best support them in that process.

We can no longer take for granted the traditional connection between social concerns and party political activism which has

sustained our movement so far. Instead we must make our case to the public, rooted in our values and expressed through our work in our communities, as to why the Labour Party is relevant to their aspirations in the twenty-first century. We must offer the public a message of hope that politics can help us make the difficult and necessary shared choices which will secure a more socially just, egalitarian and prosperous society for all. Just as Keir Hardie identified 20 years after the foundation of the party the challenges facing progressives in 1914, so we too must look to the future and ask how best to harness progress in the pursuit of social justice.

To do that we must be a political party capable of building a consensus for progressive policies and politics not just within our own ranks but across society. Failure to adapt leaves us open to drifting further away from the people we seek to assist, becoming out of touch with their lives and unable to make the case for progressive governance. In contrast, party renewal offers us the prize of a modern, responsive and radical movement which is at the heart of securing progressive change at both local and national levels across Britain. We must now have the courage our cause inspires and our communities need to reform our party and so reassert our purpose in a manner that can transform the times in which we live. The people who depend on progressive governance to provide a better future for themselves and their children deserve nothing less.

The Labour Party is what its members make it.

Clem Atlee[72]

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