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Perspectives for Open Labour: A Politics of Radical Pessimism

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This document is submitted as part of a constructive engagement with the Management Committee's Draft Position Paper (DPP). There is not much that most on the left could disagree with in the Statement. That has its merits, and we are sympathetic to not trying to have a position and policy on everything.

In one sense this is an opportune time to be launching an organisation. Corbynism is under intense scrutiny and failing to connect with a majority of the UK public, and the centre right has little new to say. But it is not enough to identify a (soft left) political space. That space has to be filled with something that is distinctive and credible enough to win significant support. Below we set out the territories that traditionally offer points of differentiation: principles, positions, policies, practice and perspectives. Our contribution focuses on perspectives. There are two reasons for this. The first is pragmatic. What has brought us together as collaborators is some shared understandings about the direction of travel of both capitalism and the left-beyond that we wouldn't know how much we'd agree on some positions and policies. The second reason is that perspectives are a good place to start as they are framing devices and should underpin strategy or at least strategic discussions. Without perspectives, it will be a struggle to survive, let alone grow, in what will be a highly divisive and challenging few years.

The DPP focuses mainly on principles and positions. We take **principles** to refer to basic core values. In the document they appear to be almost wholly applied to organisational issues such as transparency, pluralism and, democracy. These are important and no doubt reflect the origins of Open Labour, but to have differentiating force, they have to be linked to more concrete issues.

This brings us to **positions**, which we take to be differentiating claims or choices. The DPP has a section defined as Political Positions 2017-18. Here, the positions combine anti-austerity, a new social contract/bargain based on an alternative to neo-liberalism, and a social alliance that connects the new urban progressives with the old(er) left behind workers. There's some sensible stuff about how Labour should go about arguing and organising for these positions, but very little engagement with more troublesome issues that the Party's existing anti-austerity message under Miliband and Corbyn has utterly failed, or how a new social alliance can be forged when the component parts appear to be moving politically in different directions.

The meat, in terms of differentiation anyway, of the DPP can be found in the two policy statements against hard Brexit and against a (formal) Progressive Alliance. We take **policies** to be concrete measures to effect change (such as the currently fashionable basic income). The DPP gives three themes on this front: For working people, against hard Brexit; against the progressive alliance; and a mass, democratic and plural party: issues we return to later. Finally, the DPP has a focus on **practices**, which we take to be campaigns, actions and setting priorities. These are set out in the tables at the end (under the slightly confusing Statement of Aims heading) and are mainly organisational or processes to create policies and perspectives. For a fledgling organisation, they are grounded and sensible, though with the exception of something on Brexit they again lack a sharper politically differentiating thrust.

Past, present, future: towards longer term perspectives.

What the DPP largely lacks is *perspectives*, which we take to be underpinning theories or analyses-distinctive frameworks for understanding society and guiding strategy. What we'd like to do in the remainder of the document is to set out some of the contemporary strategic perspectives on offer and suggest some aspects of an alternative.

The two faces of Corbynism: retro and postmodern

Whilst the implicit reasons are understandable (concentrate on the consensual, don't pick fights you can't currently win), it's still remarkable that DPP says nothing about Corbyn/ism, given that it is the dominant and defining perspective shaping Labour and the UK left's prospects. You can discuss Corbynism in terms of (factional) organisation/s and power and how they play out in shaping the Corbyn wing of the party. This

is important and certainly helps to understand some of the upheavals in Momentum and the tactical response that Open Labour will have to consider as those forces start to move in different directions. But we are concerned with the underlying strategic perspectives. Here, we distinguish between a traditional hard left retro version and the (post)modern, metropolitan postcapitalist variety influenced by Paul Mason and others. It is worth noting that both versions have been profoundly affected and reshaped by the Brexit/Trump victory and rise of right-wing populism. We will return to that later.

Retro radicals

The politics of the core Corbyn group are defined by their long-term oppositionalist trajectory. Their rejection of capitalism and the market (including the EU as a 'capitalist club') today segues with an anti-austerity politics that became popular in the wake of the 2008 crisis and aftermath. The broader worldview is defined by an anti-imperialist legacy of the Cold War in which America is always the Great Satan and anyone opposing it is to be supported to varying degrees. A third theme is what one of us has described as vanguardism – activist-focused politics and organisation that confuses and conflates parties, social movements and the wider electorate.

For a political tendency defined almost solely by what they were against, running a mainstream social democratic party has been something of a challenge. Corbyn and McDonnell's rhetoric and policies have significantly softened running the official parliamentary opposition. On economic policy, only full nationalisation of the railways really distinguishes it from the standard issue left-Keynesianism of the Miliband leadership. Ghosts of the past, however, are still present. As has been clearly demonstrated, their historical Euroscepticism weakened the Party's 'Remain' campaign. With little obvious policy difference, the defining feature of Corbynism has become the idea of the Party as social movement. However, becoming the largest left party in Western Europe co-exists with even lower electoral support than the dark days of the early 80s and it is clear that the Labour leadership contest could be the zenith of Corbyn's electoral achievement.

Postcapitalist practitioners

Prior to Brexit/Trump a head of steam was building up around a '21st century socialism' and what the New Statesman has seized on as a new 'New Times'. For some this was predicated on a postcapitalist, post-work agenda. In The Guardian in 2015, Paul Mason proclaimed that the 'end of capitalism had begun', driven by the new information technologies that had reduced the need for work, undermined markets based on scarcity and stimulated the spontaneous growth of collaborative production. The headline policies were the grand schemes of universal basic income (UBI) and automation.

These demands issue from a new generation of left intellectuals around the Labour Party, who tend to take Corbyn as the present, and potentially disposable, placeholder for a postcapitalist political project. Younger and more cosmopolitan than the hard-left Corbynists, this 'grouping' tends to dovetail with Mason's delineation of the 'networked individual' as the prime mover of contemporary capitalism, a new class agent for 'New Times'. Rather than the workplace, their battlefield is 'all aspects of society', the evidence of which can be found in city squares and streets across the globe.

The connections between the cosmopolitans and retro radicals has been of a flirtation than a true marriage of ideas, although they share much of the same old-fashioned determinism about how history will unfold. The 'postcapitalist' agenda is an exemplary case study for how apparently radical ideas seep into the mainstream of media and politics, specifically here as a response to the crisis of social democracy as it has manifested in the experience of the Labour Party after the fall of New Labour and the 'third way'.

This utopian thinking is not without influence on the policy proposals that have emitted from the Labour Party under the command of Corbyn and McDonnell. The latter has led the way in entertaining the idea of a basic income and advocating the implementation of tech-aided, futuristic 'Socialism with an iPad'. A postcapitalist, post-work project, even setting aside all its flaws, is so disconnected from where society is politically that it is even more abstractly utopian than it seems economically. On at least some accounts, innovation and productivity are being exhausted, not extended, with politics increasingly the desperate struggle over the scant rewards that remain. And even the revolutionary agent of the new society- the networked individual- appears to be, judging by the support for Trump and Wilders among millennials, as

likely a radicalised alt-right white male or a tech-fixated conspiracy theorist than the progressive freelancer of the postcapitalist imaginary. A post-work politics is not only underlined empirically inaccurate, but also underlines undermines the possibility for a radical agenda about work and class in the here and now.

This is not about a narrow focus on class politics, but engaging with today's diverse labour market, labour process and household experiences in terms of insecurity, exploitation, excessive performance pressures, low wage growth and under-employment. Whilst it is true that traditional struggles and forms of organisation have been in decline, pessimism about agency neglects the variety of labour (or labour-related) channels and campaigns that are challenging capital, including in the gig economy, and the persistence of exploitative relations of one class with another that continue to characterise this work.

Brand new, you're retro

Meanwhile, away from the futurist reveries of its intellectual wing, the retro, hard left part of Corbynism have attempted to reclaim something from the right populist surge. Reading Brexit and Trump as expressions of class revolt against neoliberalism, the backlash each represent is treated largely as the displacement effect of failed economics. On this account, voters gripped by Trump and Brexit, can, be 'peeled away' or 'captured' with the right (left) politics. Many supporters of Corbyn have nailed their colours to the 'economic insecurity' mast as this provides a convenient political rationale for a left-led insurgency argument in which radical answers to insecurity and austerity offset or displace social conservatism amongst left behind voters. Whilst the economic dimension is a plausible part of the explanatory picture, it underestimates the scale of the struggle ahead. The 'class revolt' thesis doesn't really deal with the cultural dimension that crisscrosses feelings of being left behind.

As John Lanchester wrote in the LRB underlined shortly after the EU referendum, 'People hate to have things taken away from them. But whole swathes of the UK have spent the last decades feeling that things are being taken away from them: their jobs, their sense that they are heard, their understanding of how the world works and their place in it'. A second problem, is that but we are told all the same that Corbynism can be a left populist insurgency equivalent to Trump. We saw this in the rapidly unravelled suggestion that Corbyn would be underlined relaunched at the outset of 2017 as a rabble-rousing left populist, popping up more often on our TV screens to strike fear into the hearts of the 'establishment'. This is consistent with early claims that Corbyn could reach into disenfranchised sections of the electorate, including UKIP supporters. This was unlikely then and has proven to be deluded now. Corbyn may be perceived by his supporters as an insurgent, but the bulk of the electorate sees him, however unfairly, as a weak leader with out-of-date and out-of-touch politics. As for the left behind voters, given the dominance of themes of cultural insecurity, this pitch is amongst the least likely to appeal Are there any competing strategies from the centre and right of the Party?

Blue Labour: Class and Nation

Blue Labour were amongst the first to make an effective critique of New Labour's abandonment of working class communities, cultures and interests, as well as a critique of globalisation and commodification of more areas of social life. Its leaders have a perceptive take on the Party's demise and the need to rebuild the 'labour interest'. It is with their strategic solutions that we take issue. While there is a case for framing aspects of policy in terms of 'progressive patriotism' (or something like it), the appeal to 'faith, flag and family' is not only discordant with the left's core urban support base, but with much of contemporary social life.

Where Corbynism seeks to resolve the messy business of the class contradiction in the people or the multitude, Blue Labour proposes to resolve it in the nation. The nation state is, of course an appropriate site of policy and practice. However, the *nation* plays a different and more dangerous game, subject to pathologies as projects framed solely or largely in terms of national renewal confront the necessarily world-scale of market relations and the international nature of the division of labour. Interestingly, on the terrain of the national, Blue Labour and Corbynism have more in common – around dreams of a prioritisation of national sovereignty – than either would care to admit. There is also a common antipathy to the 'capitalist' European project- as if capital is something that operates from outside upon the nation-state rather than through it.

Even on Blue Labour's stronger terrain of class identity, class is too often seen as an accumulation of cultural associations, with the working class specifically as the custodian of a common culture. This undercuts the continuing conflicts of interest at the heart of contemporary capitalism. Talking about class without this antagonism allows an identification of the nation with these 'lost' cultural associations rather than a new radical project that seeks to recapture powers from capital, in part through pooled sovereignty. We return to this theme later.

Progress: (No) Progress

Where the Progress wing of the party is concerned, there is seldom more to say than 'back to the future', before Corbyn came along. It is doubtful it is whether the centre and right of the Party has a perspectives-led strategy. There is plenty of talk, but it is more in anguish than analysis. In a recent article the Deputy Editor of Progress, Conor Pope, argued that moderates must 'own the past' to challenge Corbyn, indicating that such forces still see the experience of New Labour as the focal point of its politics. This is not a good idea for though there many policies to be proud of, strategically New Labour was a complete failure in terms of a sustainable social democratic project.

Longer versions are available, but the short version is as follows. Once Blair dumped his flirtation with stakeholding and the 'third way', he fully embraced the positive view of globalisation and the triumph of markets articulated by his main political guru Anthony Giddens.

There is a remarkable debate between Giddens and Will Hutton at the start of a 2001 book On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism in which the latter lays out all the continuities and negative consequences of the kind of casino capitalism that were already evident and turned out to be horribly accurate. Giddens considered any problems to be only 'pathologies at the edge' and 'excesses'.

What the interchange reinforces is the extent to which an optimistic narrative of contemporary capitalism was underpinned by ideas of the knowledge or weightless economy. This so-called new economic paradigm (sold to Blair by Leadbetter, Mulgan and other remnants of the Marxism Today project) was led by financial markets, would drive globalisation and growth, and create an army of creative, well-paid and 'wired' workers. The economy could be left to itself, with the state only doing the supply-side stuff, ensuring the skills (de)regulating the labour markets. Production and the working class, on this rationale, were last century's issues.

When Iraq destroyed Blair, the same narrative was continued by Gordon Brown, with his ill-fated boast of no more boom and bust. Except this time this reading of globalisation, finance and the knowledge economy functioned as a genuine, if flawed, social democratic strategy. Financial markets would be left alone (or further deregulated) in return for using the proceeds of growth to fund public services and labour market subsidies (e.g. tax credits). The 2008 GFC destroyed that strategy, revealing the chimera of the knowledge-based economy and the instability of a financialised capitalism.

Although Brown and Obama helped rescue banks and the capital markets from their own irrational exuberance, Labour ultimately got the blame rather than the credit. Recession and austerity combined with neo-liberal forms of globalisation to deepen inequality and insecurity. The new Miliband leadership flirted with some radical ideas and policies, but lost the narrative wars on austerity, debt and spending and disappeared in a limp 'narrow retail offer' at the last and lost 2015 general election.

The need for an interventionist industrial strategy – words that were unsayable in the New Labour years – reappeared as part of Theresa May's strategic reorientation of the Tories. This is the past that Progress and the centre-right want to compete with retro Corbynism – in their different ways – to own. The former are going nowhere politically and the latter can only deflect from their own shambolic leadership by saying that it all started turning to shit under New Labour. This is true, but as Labour pollster James Morris put it recently, 'Corbyn inherited a brand that had been steadily alienating its working class base, and he made it worse'.

Towards a transformative political agenda

Our arguments are suffused by what we call a radical pessimism. If there is pessimism amongst the perspectives we have discussed, it is preoccupied with questions of agency – Labour is dead, social

democracy is obsolete, Labour's polling numbers are plummeting. While it would be difficult to concerns about the latter, our pessimism is defined by the object of action rather than the agent. In contrast to the overlapping optimistic narratives of postcapitalism and the knowledge economy, capitalism is not disappearing or even diminishing in its impacts on economy and society. Rhetoric about the sharing economy and collaborative networks is mostly just that. Optimistic narratives about capitalism diminish and deflect the tasks of forging a realistic, radical, transformative agenda. It is not social democracy that is obsolete, but its existing perspectives. The twin pressures of neoliberal forms of globalisation and a financialised economy (and economic elites) have hollowed out democratic governance, not just the feeble responses of social democratic parties. The new strands of techno-utopian '21st century socialism' have a big-picture analysis of this complex of factors, but it is often wrong about the trajectory of capitalism and too optimistic by far.

Contrary to the notion that history will unfold in our favour, renewing a radical social democratic project will not be easy. The days of 'retail offers' to the electorate are or should be over. Something more potent is needed that connects at the emotional level where national populism currently dominates. This task seems a long way from the rival visions and versions of a '21st century socialism'. As Owen Jones suggests, it requires some kind of popular (but not 'populist') politics capable of connecting with working-class and other communities on the ground. There is a large core of racist and social conservative voters who the left is highly unlikely to reach and whose views need challenging. For other voters sympathetic to national populism, the layering of identities and perceived interests are more fluid. Some working class 'left behind' voters will be open to a radical project, if their economic fears and cultural identities are understood and addressed.

A useful starting point, shared amongst a growing number of left commentators is to construct part of an alternative around a different version of the Leave slogan of '*taking back control*'. As Tom Crewe notes in an excellent recent overview of the 'Strange Death of Municipal England' for the LRB, the 'fantasies of control' around which the Leave campaign circulated were uprooted from reality precisely because of their captivation of voters 'unused to power and reckless with responsibility'. A sense of popular investment in or ownership of the world around them had ceded with the death of municipalism at the hands of centralised governments more keen on the outsourcing and privatisation of, say, water, energy, leisure and libraries than their local democratic control. At present, the left has little to say about control. It talks of robots, and not who owns them. Free money, and not who issues it. The arc of history, we hear, tends towards a technological and social unfolding that delivers utopia on a plate, without struggle.

Radicalising the demand to 'take back control' could help bridge the distance between where the left is currently at and where it needs to be. Technicolour dreams can follow. Any systematic strategy to take back and wield control would need to address economic insecurity and the stagnant productivity that limits growth in incomes and innovation. This is not just about what the state can do to redress market failure – the classic left-Keynesian policies of state investment in infrastructure and skills – but controls over what capital does. Some sovereignty has to be clawed back from capital, setting limits on what corporations do with respect to contracts (regulate the gig economy), taxes (act against tax evasion) and takeovers (strengthen anti-monopoly measures). Financialisation of the economy is the prime driver of the power and hyper-mobility of capital. A policy agenda of de-financialisation, framed as a radical re-balancing of the economy, would provide incentives for productive, green(er) and sustainable, innovation-led growth; whilst including penalties for the predatory and speculative; and shift power towards workers, consumers and other non-corporate stakeholders. Admittedly, Brexit has made this harder as some of these measures would be more effective if sovereignty was pooled, but it would nevertheless constitute a powerful alternative to the sham that is Tory 'industrial strategy'.

A left version of TBC would have to explicitly challenge ascendant national populism, north and south of the border. That has to include a clearer position on sovereignty, so that we can argue for more control over some things and shared sovereignty on others (international cooperation climate change, defense security etc). 'Sovereignty', for all it is bandied around at present, is a largely abstract concept, subject to the dewy-eyed romanticism of John Bull patriots. The 'control' auspiciously desired by Leave voters is certainly not possible on the terrain of national sovereignty around which they stake their claim – indeed, its pursuit is so dangerous precisely because of its insatiability as a demand. Sovereignty, as *The Economist*'s Bagehot columnist, Jeremy Cliffe, has noted, is pooled and not preserved. It is not a zero-sum

game. Global challenges cross borders, and our 'sovereignty' is stronger for the capacity to face them together with other states. Moreover, short of full protectionism or autarky, national sovereignty is impossible in a world where legal frameworks and standards of measurement follow the path of trade, establishing equivalent grounds for commodity exchange. To address the desire for control, we should also look closer to home.

A new TBC agenda would require a major push towards pluralist, decentralised forms of governance. There is a welcome wind behind a new, federal settlement for the UK that matches the expanded voices focused on the devolved assemblies. As we indicated earlier, we are deeply sceptical of the idea of a progressive alliance that is based on electoral pacts that would be perceived by many as another elite, choice-reducing fix. But we are wholly in favour of greater cooperation around key policies, notably voting reform for the UK parliament and local elections. It is notable that many voters who feel left out used their Brexit vote in order to make a difference. Whilst it was not the kind of difference that most of us wanted, it gives some indication of how existing choices and outcomes under first-past-the-post feed cynicism and disengagement.

Such a decentralising agenda would in any case be consistent with a renewed emphasis on bottom-up initiatives. This new democracy needs to be rooted in practical and concrete relationships that channel political sentiment in a deliberative way. TBC can start locally, for example using the deleterious cutbacks enforced on city halls to create space for localised grassroots alternatives to step in and 'co-produce' on a municipal level that which councils formerly delivered. . A radical TBC agenda is only part of existing and future left perspectives. But, there's no point in willing the world to change if it is beyond our control. We should work at seizing the latter instead of waiting idly by for the former to unfold.