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DIRECTION FOR THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT

CARDS ON THE TABLE

by Michael Prior

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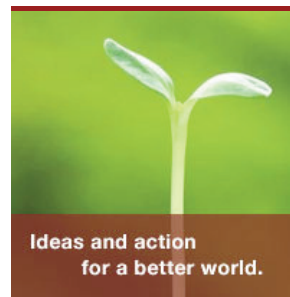
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“ The small increase in turnout seems mainly to have been previously Labour voters responding, perhaps a little wearily, certainly hesitantly, to the old call to Keep the Tories Out which had become the drumbeat of most Labour-inclined commentators in the weeks before the election. This was almost certainly the reason for the dreadful results of all the left alternatives to Labour. ”



Compass publications are intended to create real debate and discussion around the key issues facing the democratic left - however the views expressed in this publication are not a statement of Compass policy.



Cards on the table

The author is someone who left the Labour Party in despair fifteen or so years ago and has never for a moment regretted it. Now a member of the Green Party, he will never, ever, vote Labour again so long as it is led by men who refuse to accept that lies and deceit led Britain into an illegal and immoral war. (Being led by a woman is, of course, even less likely). He will also feel a grim satisfaction when such as David Miliband and Jack Straw are hung out to dry for lying to Parliament about British involvement in torture and illegal rendition; grim because it will do little for those who suffered the sanctioned torture. Nor is he on his own. As the Dixie Chicks put it, we're not ready to make nice.

I start like this to make clear that the British left is not, as some Compass initiatives seem to suggest, an inchoate mass just waiting for the right trigger to crystallise into a progressive alliance ready to unite behind Labour. Rather it is fractured body of people, riven with considerable bitterness and distrust and wary of any kind of effort to drive it into a convenient corral however enticingly labelled as the home of a rainbow, golden, greenleft or somesuch colourful coalition. And that's just the members of the Labour Party. And yet, as a long-term member of that left, it is painfully obvious that some kind of alliance is just what we have to come to terms with.

The most striking feature of the May election was just how ordinary it was. In months before voting most observers, including myself, predicted that it would be a 'wild' election with an even lower turnout than 2005 and with some kind of revenge being wreaked on the major parties, in particular Labour, after the expenses scandal. The electorate, it was commonly felt, had become disillusioned with system. What actually happened was a small, though important, increase in turnout, resounding defeat for

independents and various 'protest' candidates, flat-lining for the nationalists and electoral catastrophe for small parties of the left. In other words, business as usual with the, historically, not uncommon final result of the arrow of the two-party wheel-of-fortune coming to rest in that sector marked No Overall Majority. This rather normal situation has, however, been over-shadowed and largely ignored by one, rather startling, political innovation. Instead of following the standard practice of several small and no-majority governments in the past — to stagger on for a while and then call another election — the Conservatives, rather cleverly, and the Liberal Democrats, possibly cleverly, agreed a formal, negotiated coalition, a shift in governance which may turn out to be a critical watershed in British politics. Or may not.

This rather unexpected normality of the May election was what stopped a bad election for Labour turning into a rout. The small increase in turnout seems mainly to have been previously Labour voters responding, perhaps a little wearily, certainly hesitantly, to the old call to Keep the Tories Out which had become the drumbeat of most Labour-inclined commentators in the weeks

before the election. This was almost certainly the reason for the dreadful results of all the left alternatives to Labour. In the case of my own Green Party this was disguised by the somewhat fluky

victory of Caroline Lucas in Brighton, fluky because this is pretty much the only seat in the country which is effectively a four-way marginal where the winner needs only 31% of the vote. In nearly all other constituencies, the Green Party suffered serious declines in actual votes with the deposit-saving level reached in only two places outside Brighton.

This unexpected result, a 'normal' election but one which has turned British politics in a totally new direction has provided the Labour Party and the wider left with the difficult problem of how to respond to coalition politics. The immediate, knee-jerk response has largely been what might be termed the pit-bull strategy; to attack ferociously on all fronts hoping to split the alliance between the two governing parties so that it will collapse and force a new election. There is apparent sense in this strategy for the Labour Party in that if such an election returned a Labour majority, a possibility which gains credibility if it were to be held in the midst of savage public expenditure cuts, then business-as-usual could be resumed with the bonus that the growing challenge from the third-party might be effectively extinguished.

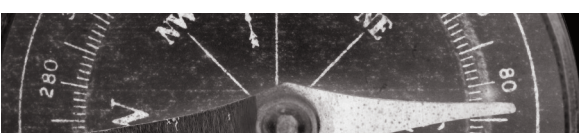
However, there are two obvious risks attached to the pit-bull approach. First, a forced election could just provide the Tories with a parliamentary majority and the mandate to proceed with their public-sector cuts. Second, and in my view much the most likely, the assault on the coalition could fail and it would carry on with increasing confidence for a full five-year span. Clearly, a great deal depends upon the proposed referendum on a new



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voting system. The Alternative Vote is far from proportional but it will undoubtedly favour the LibDems, probably awarding them another forty or so seats something which, like it or not, would be 'fairer'. It

would also be a system which would effectively cement coalition politics into British governance. Just how far Labour will succeed in weaselling its way out of its manifesto commitment to an AV system remains to be seen. If it succeeds in successfully opposing its implementation in 2015 (not to mention the entirely fair removal of its current 8% or so poll advantage because of slanted electoral



boundaries) then the coalition could collapse and Labour might return. On the other hand, opposing what many might see not only as reneging a manifesto promise but also a move towards a fairer voting system could result in electoral suicide.

The risks associated with the pit-bull approach are not just short-term. Outside the left commentariat which shrieks "split" every time some disagreement within the coalition is aired, there is a feeling (and it can only be a feeling) that the electorate is beginning to feel rather comfortable with coalition politics in which differing views are openly expressed and compromises are agreed. Unless some countervailing left-leaning alternative is found there is the distinct possibility, indeed probability given the bias of AV voting, that Britain will be governed by a centre-right coalition for many years. The C word has been much used on the left in recent months but has been given remarkably little concrete clothing, often reducing to the dismal slogan of the Labour Representation Committee – support the coalition against cuts and join the Labour Party. So what are the obstacles to forming at least the embryo of such a coalition? There seems to me to be three rather separate issues here.

The first is the obvious problem that the policy direction of the New Labour governments, to which all four of the male candidates for the Labour leadership are tied, contained much that overlaps, often quite specifically, with current Coalition policies. It would be too much of an intrusion into personal grief for most Compass members to labour the point, but the fact is that the Coalition is proving quite adroit at pointing out just how much of what they are doing is little more than an extension of Labour policy. A VAT rise? Would not Darling have done just this next January? Apparently so according to Mandelson. Academy schools? Was it not a declared ambition of Labour to hasten their formation? Public expenditure cuts? Was it not Brown's declared policy to slash the scale of deficit financing? Just how

Labour can extricate itself from this morass remains to be seen but it clearly a problem for the formation of a centre-left bloc that its major potential component has a recent history of sitting rather to the right of centre.

The second and, in its way, more important problem is the incapacity of Labour, both leadership and many members, to understand the concept of political alliances. There are good historical reasons for this block which are difficult even to summarise here. (Those interested in greater detail might refer to an essay of mine in *Left Out: Policies for a Left Opposition Today* which can be found at www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/ebooks.html or <http://hegemonics.co.uk> Essentially they come down to the fact that in its origin and throughout much of its history, Labour was itself a coalition bringing together rather disparate groups into one rambling organisation, perpetually at odds with each other and united only by the need to present a single electoral face.

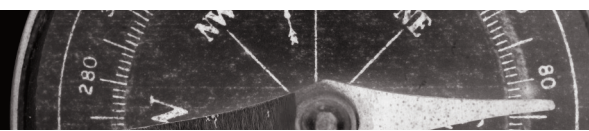
This coalition existed through to the 1970s when, it can be argued, it actually reached its apogee with just about every left group in Britain, including the Communists and most Trotskyist bands as well as Labour factions, in various informal coalitions fighting each other for control, direct or indirect, of the Labour Party. It fell apart in 1981 with the defection of the Social Democrats and afterwards with the reorganisation of Labour as a centralised body suppressing both internal factionalism and external links and drastically limiting the democratic involvement of its members. Yet despite this change, the mindset of Labour, both leadership and members, across left and right, remains one which retains the idea that Labour remains the coalition of the left and cannot contain the concept of political alliance outside itself. Two vignettes to illustrate this, one from the right and one nearer the left.

In his Kier Hardie lecture in July this year, David Miliband asked the rhetorical

question "Why did Hardie refuse an alliance with the Liberals?" <http://www.davidmiliband.net/2010/07/09/kier-hardie-lecture-2010/> To which, of course, the answer is he didn't as, after being elected in West Ham with the Liberals not standing a candidate, he moved to sharing his dual-member seat in Merthyr Tydfil with a Liberal and helping to negotiate the Lib/Lab pact in 1903 which led both a Liberal landslide and the election of 29 MPs under the name of the Labour Representation Committee. Hardie worked as part of various Liberal/Labour alliances throughout his parliamentary career. It is possible that Miliband's mistake stems from a poor education. More likely it stems from the ingrained habit of rejecting alliance as part of any Labour strategy and refusing to see that it is actually something present even in its formation.

More towards the left, just after Gordon Brown's coronation as Labour leader, Jon Trickett M.P. wrote in 2007 for *Compass* about the task facing Labour: We need to learn to multi task again; simultaneously reconnecting with all parts of the coalition into a new historic bloc. This is the task which Gordon Brown must address if he is to win. The first hundred days were devoted to emphasising the change of PM and also to establishing an impression of competence and strength. These are necessary attributes of governance but as the polls now show they do not amount to a strategy for reconnecting with Labour's missing millions. The stakes are high but the prize is a great one. Brown has the opportunity to create a coalition, win a fourth term and in the process change Britain into the social democratic country which is waiting to be born. www.compassonline.org.uk/news/item.asp?n=940

The coalition to which Trickett refers is one which he believes formed in 1997 when "New Labour" created a huge coalition, or historic bloc, of social classes, ethnicities, progressives and public sector workers". Trickett's problem, leaving aside



the curious bundle of social categories he deploys, is that he fails to see any difference between the Gramscian concept of an historic bloc and the political formation which seeks to represent that bloc. He automatically sees only Labour as the legitimate political vehicle for representing the somewhat amorphous social bloc with which he is concerned. In a sense, Trickett is a true child of the 1970s and it is fully in line with the politics of that period that he was part of the group of Compass M.P.s that resisted any introduction of electoral reform in the Compass agenda. Ironically, this was the one policy which could have won a victory for Labour in May had it been deployed in 2007.

There is no sign that the Labour leadership has learnt any lessons from this. We know, after all, the direction which David Miliband wants to take the Labour Party having set it out last year in a Tribune article

www.tribunemagazine.co.uk/2009/08/07/how-the-next-decade-can-belong-to-labour

He wants to shift Labour into being a party with supporters rather than members; a vast mailing list of potential donors and election workers with the US Democrats and the Greek Pasok as his model. There is little sign that any of the other leadership contenders would demur from this whatever vague noises they make about party democracy to reel in the membership vote. Under the business-as-usual scenario, such a reorganisation might make sound sense in finally putting the idea of Labour as a coalition to rest and finally converting Labour into a kind of political brand rather than a party.

However, it has little relevance to the problem of creating a new political coalition to counter that of the Conservative and Liberal Democrats. It was, I think, the British Communist Party which first thought up the concept of broad social alliances which would, in effect, replace the working class as the leading national progressive force with, first, the anti-monopoly alliance and then

the broad-democratic alliance. My favourite recipe for these is that they would include "workers in factories, offices, professions, working farmers, producers and consumers, owner-occupiers and tenants, housewives, young people, students, pensioners, workers in the peace movement and those active in the defence of democracy", that is pretty much everybody including some under multiple hats. Trickett's version (which I suspect owes a lot to this 1970s quasi-Gramscian theory) is much the same kind of thing, a kind of hopeful shopping-list similar to the notes sent up the chimney to Father Christmas every December. This is our third problem. The Gramscian concept of an historic bloc is a grouping of social forces which, together, can form a political alliance, conservative or progressive. It is, in other words, a political calculation which shifts throughout a nation's history.

The task of the British left today is to envisage just what a progressive social bloc looks like today. Clearly this is a much more complex task than either naming any immediate party coalition or simply listing a comprehensive social map of British society. It involves understanding just where nationalism in Scotland and Wales fits into such a progressive bloc; the future role of organised labour in its different forms; how social activists, particularly those concerned about climate change, can be induced to work with political structures rather than, as at present, largely outside them; the role of the large number of NGOs with radical agendas, for example those which participated in the G20 Put People First marches. And these are just the simpler issues.

Simple naming such a wide groups suggests the difficulty of the task. The left has become splintered across such a wide range of groups, some organised into single issue campaigns, some with an agenda which goes beyond any simple classification as 'left', that it is impossible for any single agency, let alone one party, to organise them. A rather complex kind of

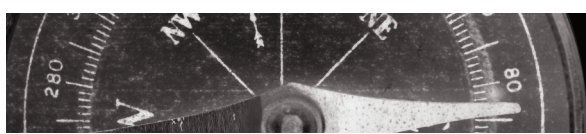
coalition is not just desirable, it is a fundamental necessity. And, make no mistake, it has to be done with the immediate backdrop of a coalition which is in the process of itself organising a centre-right bloc which may prove surprisingly resilient. Cameron's Big Society and Broken Britain pitches can be easily mocked. However, he is reaching into an insight about a current social malaise in Britain which has a wide resonance and not just on the right. (See for example, a Compass Thinkpiece on Feel-Bad Britain to which I contributed some three years ago

<http://clients.squareeye.com/uploads/compass/documents/CTP26FeelbadBritainPermalink2.pdf>

All in all, the British left is between the rock and the hard place with the rock being the need to respond actively and constructively to the attacks upon the public sector and the hard place being the lack of any effective political agency with which to do this. The role of the Labour Party with its seemingly unstoppable move towards centralised control and its grip, albeit highly regional, on left electoral results is clearly a central problem. But so too is the unremitting 'workerism' of parts of the left, which still cannot see past the largely emasculated trade-unions as vehicles for political change, and the quasi-anarchism of parts of the activist left. In other words, to reach the destination of a left coalition it would be best not to start from here. But at least to state the problem and outline the destination is a start, a point from which the British left can move. Compass could play an important role in this given its sometimes uneasy stance promoting both a more pluralist left politics and also a commitment to supporting Labour. In a sense this paradoxical position encapsulates the problems of the left. Perhaps it could start by coming clean about this dilemma.

Cards on the table, remember.

Michael Prior



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Compass is the democratic left pressure group,
whose goal is to debate
and develop the ideas for a more equal
and democratic world, then
campaign and organise to help ensure
they become reality.

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