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# thinkPIECE

**Our Direction is our Destination:**  
*Leading in Our Good Society*



By Veena Vasista

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## Our Direction is our Destination: *Leading in Our Good Society*

by Veena Vasista

**C**ompass wants to build 'The Good Society.' The good society is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Yet, we can easily begin to think of the good society as merely an end point to which someone else - a group of leaders, for example - is going to take us. Or we might see it as a place someone else will build for us and we'll just walk on into it - assuming they can succeed in making it happen.

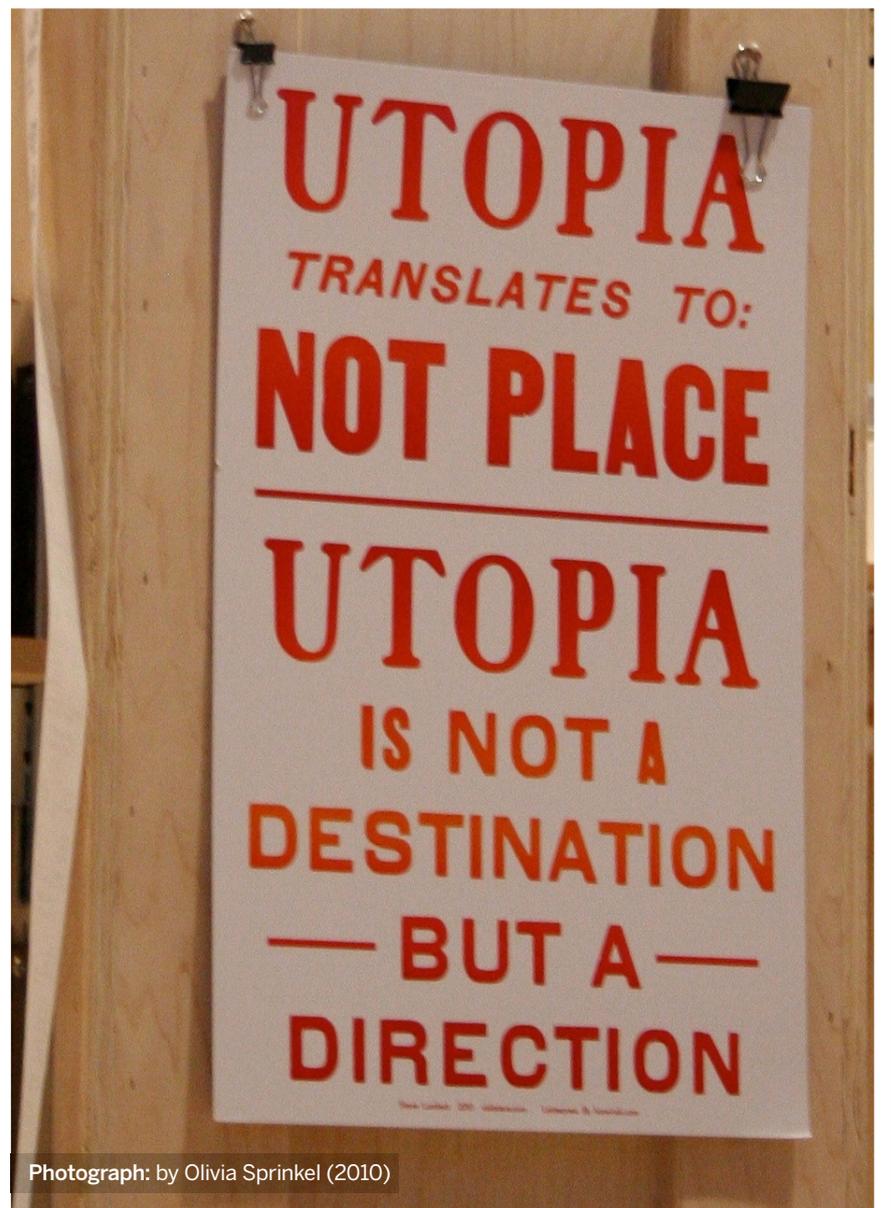
This kind of mind-set sees change as a process of one group of people taking control to lead others to a clearly defined destination. Last year, led by such thinking, some people demanded that the St Paul's Occupiers accompany their call out for a change in direction with a specific set of policy demands. In doing so, they were missing a crucial point about Occupy and growing *our* good society.

Our good society is not some place out there that we are going to get to via a detailed plan/map drawn up by a small number of people. Our good society exists in all of us – it is a seed we all carry, that can lead us in how we move through and experience the world. The more each individual recognises the seed is there and connects with it to direct their choices, the more fruits and flowers we'll see – the more we will experience and collectively grow our good society, often in ways we can neither imagine nor plan. Occupy is, therefore, partially about connecting with that seed within each of us and nurturing it to guide us in a new direction.

In this context, if we want to reflect on what leadership will grow our good society then let us focus our attention on how we – firstly as individuals and then collectively – both lead and allow ourselves to be led, regardless of where we might sit in current hierarchies. Let us be wary of giving too much attention to trying to change the behaviours of individual leaders, the people we think of as the 'top' and in charge. Let us give significant attention to leaders moving in the 'middle' and at the 'bottom' and to the other important influences, e.g. internal

beliefs, individual and collective narratives, leading us in how we live and create.

I've written this piece having travelled down five connected paths: <sup>(1)</sup> nearly twenty years of working on social policy, including seven which focused on discrimination and inequalities in the workplace <sup>(2)</sup> practicing as a community mediator in East London <sup>(3)</sup> learning about 'inside-out' community development <sup>(4)</sup> practicing as an Ethical Fitness® workshop facilitator for the Institute for Global Ethics and <sup>(5)</sup> embracing the spirit of the 2008 Obama campaign



Photograph: by Olivia Sprinkel (2010)

and, more recently, the Occupy Movement. In walking these paths, my attention in social change has moved firmly away from directly trying to influence structures, institutions and social policies to exploring and working with the cultural norms and dynamics that guide our relationships and our day-to-day choices.<sup>1</sup>

My journey leads me to ask: How do we – the people - lead ourselves to become more connected with our power, our voice, and each other? How do we combine autonomy and individualism with a sense of collective purpose and responsibility? How do we lead ourselves to grow our good society from within, from the inside-out? How do we lead ourselves through a transformative journey whereby we experience awakenings and openings in our hearts and minds that guide us to be people who create a different world?

A transformative journey involves working with emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, stories/narratives and trust. It means acknowledging and working with fear, risk-aversion, egos, and vulnerability. It means a commitment to developing stronger, more nurturing relationships between us human beings (and between human beings and the planet, but that's for another thinkpiece by someone else).

As we grow and change internally – as individuals and a collective – so, too will our creations, e.g., relationships, institutions, systems, structures and policies. This is a dynamic, iterative, organic process. The internal journey is one of the most difficult dimensions of social change; it requires us to let go of who we have been in order to become who we can be. For a lot of people, this is scary. Yet, as intimidated or sceptical as we might feel, we need to lead ourselves out of fear, doubt and dis-trust and into a strong sense of (self) belief in the human spirit and our collective potential.

In the course of my journey, I picked up the fundamental belief that the human spirit is intrinsically compassionate, collaborative and creative; this is the foundation of our good society within us. The more this spirit

grows and guides people, the stronger our good society becomes. I suggest, led by this belief, we commit to three practices for opening up seeds and growing our good society:

- **Distribution (power-sharing, autonomy and mutuality)**
- **Integrity**
- **Awakening of hearts and minds.**

### **Distribution (power-sharing, autonomy and mutuality)**

*"...leaders-as-hosts...know they can trust in other people's creativity and commitment to get the work done. They know that other people, no matter where they are in the organizational hierarchy, can be as motivated, diligent and creative as the leader, given the right invitation." <sup>ii</sup>*

#### **Margaret Wheatley**

*"My life can be a series of well-intentioned but inconsequential victories that make no real difference in the lives of others. Or I can acknowledge that I need what my clients can do in their community as badly as they need what I can do in the courtroom. If my work is to have meaning, I need to acknowledge that I need them as badly as they need me." <sup>iii</sup>*

#### **Edgar Cahn**

These days, it is increasingly popular in policymaking to recognise and celebrate that we have huge amounts of valuable internal resources when it comes to changing our own lives and communities. You can see this manifest, for example, in various community development approaches and in proposals for greater co-production in public services. The guiding idea is that we are often failing to recognise and tap into our inherent resources. Spring boarding from this seemingly new wisdom, we can choose to let a commitment to power sharing, autonomy, and mutuality lead us. We can be confident that when we give one another the right support and motivation –

or invitation (see Wheatley quote at the start of this section) – to step into our values, passion and experience we can do a pretty good job of creatively and collaboratively figuring things out.

This is where distributive leadership comes into play. Distributive leadership acknowledges the power of people to take autonomous creative action and the value in encouraging them/ourselves to do so. Leaders can choose to be solitary heroes (see Wheatley quote) or command and control dictators, but those ways of working are unlikely to unleash people to be their creative and collaborative best.

The Obama campaign did this to a great extent, in 2008. Thousands of volunteers from different backgrounds came to local party offices because they saw a campaign that believed in their contribution. Within the boundaries of broad principles set by the top, the campaign encouraged people to get out there and freely use whatever abilities and passions they have to engage more people.<sup>iv</sup> The Occupy Movement is taking the approach further – seeking to unleash people without clarity of who is at the top or a goal as specific as winning an election. Occupy isn't – contrary to what some people say – leaderless. Rather it is nurturing a kind of distributive leadership culture. People in physically occupied sites are playing a distributive leadership role within a wider Movement – loosely guiding, shaping and opening up new spaces for people to wake up and rethink their/our role in the world. One of the key steers coming out from different sites has been not only 'Yes, we can' but 'Dammit, we must change!'

As Occupiers – in and out of tents – we know bringing about transformative culture change is no small or easy task. In one respect, for example, we are in a Catch-22. Entrenched in the status quo and its machinery, political leaders - the people we might tend to look to most to guide us – are more or less in the worst place from which to do so. Reflecting this, a catalyst for Occupy is the reality that change seems unlikely to be led from the 'top



Let's say, nevertheless, a political or another type of leader at the 'top' wants to spearhead change. If they sincerely want culture change (that is, of course, the crux of the matter) they should want others at all levels in their institution, organisation, community etc., to grab the reins and lead in their own way. This means these leaders need to be prepared for distributive leadership that includes upward challenges to their own authority – power sharing and autonomy in action.

In addition to autonomy and power-sharing, moving into distributive leadership requires mutuality. In a community development workshop, for example, I heard a story about a soup kitchen where over time the homeless people who came to eat started expressing an interest in being cooks. This happened. Then the policy became that anyone volunteering also had to eat there – be fed by homeless people. This community blurred the distinction between the server and the served. To make a similar point, Marshall Ganz (credited with a leading role in the grassroots organising campaign for President Obama's 2008 election) gives the example of teachers recognising that they are constantly learning from their students. We must frequently do the same in our various communities. We must blur the line between the leader and the led. We must recognise and value the mutual dependence inherent in our relationships (see Edgar Kahn quote at the start of this section), rather than stake claims for expertise, superiority and status.

## Integrity

We can choose to be led by a culture of integrity. Integrity refers to making choices and behaving in ways that are aligned with our ethical values and our commitment to nurturing the human spirit. Integrity mitigates the destructive roles ego, power, ambition and unchecked emotions can play in how we choose to act. A culture of integrity is the foundation for trusting, secure relationships. At its heart, it will have open dialogue, awareness, reflection, and a litany of tensions and seeming

contradictions through which we must continually navigate ourselves. The trick is to believe we can do just that – navigate the difficult terrains to create constructive and creative resolutions.

## Core components of a culture of integrity include:

### *Openly articulating and deliberating our ethical values*

Just because we don't talk about ethical values, doesn't mean they aren't there and guiding us in one way or another. Talking openly about ethical values gives people helpful, tangible language and concepts for negotiating the often rocky terrains of living a life of integrity, particularly when it comes to sensitive, emotive and fear-filled issues. Take, for example, discrimination. The words fairness, respect, equality might be used in equality posters or guidance, but that isn't the same as encouraging people to reflect and openly deliberate these and other values and what they mean in growing a more equitable culture. Holding a space for people to talk meaningfully and honestly about ethical values gets them engaged and opens them up. In doing so, after all, you are asking people what is important to them, what really matters. From there, meaningful dialogue (however discomfiting) can arise and the journey to finding common ground and creative collaboration can begin.

### *Ethical decision-making*

Ethical decision-making assumes that the process of how we make a decision is often as important as the outcome of the decision itself. Decision-makers wanting to gain the trust and respect of others are more likely to succeed if they can demonstrate they are acting on the basis of informed, ethically robust judgement. This is particularly so in decisions where we find ourselves not in a clear case of 'right versus wrong', but in a dilemma of 'right versus right' and the 'right' choice is not at all straightforward. <sup>v</sup>

Leading with integrity in these circumstances is not about finding the moral high ground, but about thoughtful and honest consideration of why we are taking the action we are taking. This involves scrutinising our motives when making decisions, e.g. assessing how different choices will impact on individual and collective well-being, how they align with short-term and long-term interests, how they sit with our commitment to ethical values and human rights. In the past two years, ethical-decision making has come to the forefront of social activism. More and more people are asking "Where are the ethics and where are the necessarily well-considered deliberations underpinning the choices business and political leaders have made and are still making e.g. around bankers' bonuses and dramatic public service cuts?"

### *Moral courage*

Integrity means choosing to exhibit moral courage. Sometimes we will be in a situation where we sense the 'wrongness' or 'unfairness' or 'harm-to-be-committed' from an act/decision/behaviour. We have a choice in those moments to speak out or stay silent. Often, this choice is by no means easy – requiring an individual to weigh up many conflicting considerations. This includes the reality, for example, that whistle-blowers are often vilified rather than celebrated. <sup>vi</sup> Tough as such choices may be, we need to choose to exhibit moral courage – in large and seemingly small ways, day-in and day-out.

### *Active Responsibility*

Active responsibility is implicit in the three components above. Yet, it feels necessary to single it out for distinct illumination. A culture of integrity encourages us to honour our responsibilities, in the different roles we all play. Active responsibility includes: identifying and accepting the roles we have to play in growing our good society; taking ownership of our beliefs and behaviours; constructively holding ourselves and others accountable for our/their actions and behaviour; allowing



others to hold us accountable; admitting when we are wrong or have made a mistake and learning from our mistakes.

Responsibility is a value UK Uncut Legal Action has recently brought to the forefront with its legal action against HMRC for its handling of a tax deal with Goldman Sachs. Perhaps ironically, the Obama 2008 campaign emphasised the importance of this type of active responsibility throughout – the role of civil society in holding government and politicians to account. Governance, said the campaign message, is a partnership between elected representatives and the people – leader as servant and citizen as leader. It is the citizens who have the responsibility and are expected to hold the President and Congress to account.

## Awakening of Hearts and Minds

*"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."*

**Albert Einstein**

*"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

**Dr. Howard Thurman, Theologian and U.S. Civil Rights Leader**

*"Successful political movements have always recognised that the route taken to achieve a particular goal actually shapes the nature of that goal itself."<sup>vii</sup>*

**Marc Stears**

The Einstein quote above is used a lot these days. I have one friend who scoffed when she heard I was going to use it in this piece *"Oh not that quote, it is so-overused."* She's right, but hackneyed as it may be, it's hugely relevant to culture change. I want to try and get underneath this idea by saying that what we create –

from our own homes to our public institutions – is a mirror image of who we are being, of what is alive in our hearts and minds. To build on Marc Stears' related point above, how we go about things determines where we end up, and who we are determines how we go about things. This is what I think is at the core of what Einstein is saying. The same mind set (assumptions, attitudes, narratives, beliefs, prejudices, etc) and heart (emotions, passions, values, intuition) that created a problem cannot solve it. If we want a different kind of future – we have to be people who see and connect differently with ourselves, each other and the creative process.

In too many spaces, we are leaders who allow ourselves to be led from a place of fear, insecurity and arrogance. The result is we have been growing/feeding competitiveness, greed, tribalism, adversarial politics, selfishness, distrust, ignorance, superiority rather than mutuality, and lack of imagination. For me, the Occupy Movement is a rebellion against this. It is wake up call to lead and be led differently – to change our direction of travel.

Neal Lawson wrote in his foreword to *The Good Society: Compass Programme for Renewal*: "The race is on to win hearts and minds before we lose the belief that something different is possible."<sup>viii</sup> He was right – we need people to believe in our true human potential and in the probability that we can live it. He was also wrong. We are in a race not to win, but to awaken and open up our hearts and minds. It is through such an awakening that individual and collective (self) belief and mutual trust will root and grow.

How do we wake ourselves/each other up? In any community, the journey begins with people taking time out to build relationships in as wide a circle as possible. We do this by listening to each other's stories to learn about what's alive in each other (see Howard Thurman quote at the start of this section), what we have in common, the future we want to create, and how we might create together or at least

support each other. At the same time, we commit to being self-reflective and aware, more empathic, more questioning of our own attitudes, assumptions, prejudices, beliefs, and fears. We need to see where our different stories are taking us – leading us.

The process of becoming more awake and aware is invariably a mixture of highs and lows, requiring trust and persistence. Last year, for example, I co-facilitated a mediation process where two neighbours could not even be in the same room as each other at the start. It was difficult to see the journey they would go on that might lead to reconciliation. At multiple times in the process, it was easy to think "No, they won't!" Eventually, however, they did.

The mediation began with the two parties in separate rooms. At the end of the mediation, they walked out the front door together. What happened? They had, previously in separate meetings, told us their conflict stories in depth. So, we started off by asking each party to draw or describe how things are and how they want things to be – tell a simple story of change and hope. From there, they talked to each other through us - we literally shuttled back and forth passing communication between the two parties.

After two rounds of this, they agreed to come into the same room, sitting at opposite ends of a long table. They eyed each other up. They shared awkward, weighty silences. They raised voices. They expressed frustration, anger and bewilderment. They asked each other questions. They told their respective stories. They listened. They empathised. They found common ground, e.g. both parties valued peace and quiet, it turned out one party was volunteering at the hospice where the grandmother of the other party used to reside. They began to remove the boxes and labels that they had been using to define how they saw and reacted to each other. They made requests. Eventually, they came to an agreement on steps they each could take to live amicably as neighbours.

The fact that the two parties showed up that morning to participate in mediation was a sign of some degree of wakefulness. For example, they were open to starting a journey without knowing the outcome. No one came to the table with fixed ideas as to how they might work together to resolve their conflict and create a better future. They agreed to trust the process without knowing exactly where it was taking them. From there – with support from us mediators that became less and less needed as their conversation went on - they journeyed through awakenings and openings in their hearts and minds by working with honest dialogue, open discussion of ethical and other values, self-reflection and a willingness to be vulnerable and take risks. Guided by a belief in compassion, creativity and collaboration they worked constructively with anger, fear, and frustration to change the direction of their story.

## Conclusion

Neal Lawson and I met at the end of 2011 to talk about this paper. He was thinking about leadership specifically in relation to the Labour Party. At that time, he had front of mind his frustration with how it is that politicians enter office strongly connected with progressive politics but after spending only a short time in the parliamentary machinery, seem to lose their way. They become different to the people we thought we were seeing and knew.

In such a scenario, politicians are usually being pulled and pushed into exhibiting behaviours that go against what we hope is their natural inclination. The directions of multiple, entwined and unfortunately destructive cultures, e.g. Parliament, media, easily entrap them. Their capacity to resist the pull and the push is particularly diminished if they don't have a strong inner moral compass and external support network. This journey – from being an inspiring leader guided by integrity and a creative, compassionate human spirit to being a leader who ends up constrained, combative, prone to making choices

lacking in creativity and integrity and coming from a place of fear, frustration, insecurity, and despair - illuminates a highly significant general challenge: we can find it very hard to embody - per Gandhi's instruction - the change we want to see and be, confronted as we are by systems, structures and cultural norms strongly geared towards pulling us in a different direction. But as the Occupy Movement reminds us, and various community mediation cases remind me, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Elsewhere, others can provide a detailed, well-informed analysis. However, I conclude with some broad thoughts on what trying might look like when it comes to the Labour Party. The established combative and fear-driven culture in the political arena is so strong that cultural transformation is unlikely to be driven solely from the 'top.' This includes culture change within the Labour Party, so that it can better reflect and in turn play its role in growing our good society. Trying means, if it is you who is out there leading (at any level, in any space) then share the load - ask others for support and partnership. Let go of taking on the role of a solitary, invulnerable hero. Trying means encouraging and supporting others to go out there themselves and lead, guide, inspire. Trying means leading from behind sometimes, leading from the front at other times, and sometimes being led.

Whatever your role – as a visible Party leader or as an occasional activist who turns up every now and again - trying means finding ways to join up with others and nurture the movement in big and small ways. Trying means talking, listening, being reflective, taking action, finding common ground, collaborating, creating. Trying means working constructively with conflict, because if people are being authentic, honest, and ready to engage openly with their values, stories, beliefs etc., they will inevitably disagree with one another. Trying means a commitment to risk-taking. Trying means vigilance as you seek to uphold your integrity throughout. Have uncomfortable deliberations. Regularly check in with your

attitudes, prejudices, biases, beliefs and assumptions. Have compassion for mistakes made and the inevitable struggles everyone will experience. Repeat. Persist. We can only take it one step/one conversation/one action (small and large) at a time, while we continue to be led by a belief in - and connection with - our compassionate, creative, and collaborative human spirit.



## Questions...

1. What would it mean for political parties, governing bodies, think tanks, campaigning organisations, etc., to steer a change in direction by heading down a path that is more distributive – strewn with the seeds of shared power, autonomy and mutuality?
2. What are the unifying stories we hear from different voices, e.g. party leaders? Do they connect with and enliven our compassionate, creative, collaborative human spirit or feed the beast of competition, superiority, combat, fear, and insecurity? What's your story - what inspires and motivates you to play an active role (large or small) in trying to create change?
3. In what ways are you seeking to connect in genuine mutuality with people outside your usual circles? When you meet new people and/or people with different views from yours, what is your invitation to them?
4. What spaces and tools do you have for supporting yourself and others to be reflective and gain greater self-awareness?
5. What internal and external support do you need to feel more confident to walk the path of integrity? How can you support others to do the same?

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<sup>i</sup> My understanding of 'inside-out' community development is heavily influenced by a range of practitioners in the UK and the US, most notably Jim Diers, Jane Foot, Trevor Hopkins, John P. Kretzmann, Cormac Russell, Hazel Stutely.

<sup>ii</sup> Margaret Wheatley with Debbie Frieze (2010) *Leadership in an Age of Complexity: From Hero to Host*. See <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/Leadership-in-Age-of-Complexity.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Edgar Cahn (2004) *No More Throw-Away People. The Co-Production Imperative*. Washington D.C.: Essential Books

<sup>iv</sup> Marshall Ganz (2009). *Distributed Leadership in the Obama Campaign*. MIT Leadership Centre (Lecture). See <http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/662>

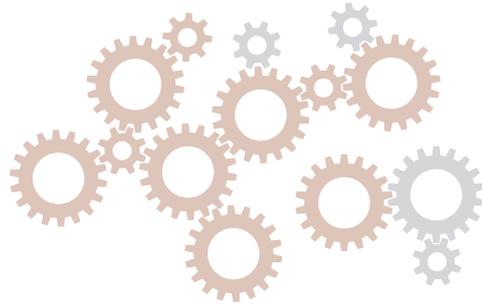
<sup>v</sup> See Rushworth Kidder for a detailed explanation of 'right' versus 'right' dilemmas. Rushworth Kidder (2009) *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. London: Harper-Collins.

<sup>vi</sup> See 'Doing the Ethical Thing May Be Right, but it Isn't Automatic' by Alina Tugend in *New York Times*, 18 November 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/19/your-money/why-doing-the-ethical-thing-isnt-automatic.html?pagewanted=all>

<sup>vii</sup> Marc Stears (2011). "Leadership, Democracy, and Organising" in *Soundings*. Number 47. London

<sup>viii</sup> Jonathan Rutherford and Hetan Shah (Eds) (2006). *The Good Society: Compass Programme for Renewal*. Compass. London.

**“ Compass are 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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