

THINK PIECE

#91

With victory in sight, how can the British Left gain hegemony?

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Anthony Barnett is the co-founder and was the first Editor of openDemocracy and writes regularly for it. His most recent book is [The Lure of Greatness. England's Brexit and America's Trump](#) (published by Unbound). He is a veteran of the democratic struggle in the UK and co-ordinated Charter 88 from 1988-95 when it influenced the Labour Party's adoption of human rights and constitutional reform under John Smith and then Tony Blair.

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This is an extended version of Anthony Barnett's contribution to Compass' session at *The World Transformed* at the Labour Party conference in Brighton in September 2017 with Clive Lewis MP, Lisa Nandy MP, Hilary Wainwright and Jeremy Gilbert, on *Hegemony versus one more heave*. It forms part of Compass' thinking on progressive political strategy.

We are keen to keep exploring these key issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

Compass **Think Pieces** are shorter, sharper and more immediate responses to key issues. The ideas and the thoughts are always those of the author, not Compass. They can cover any topic that helps us understand better what a good society should or could look like and how we might get there. We welcome suggestions for future publications, especially from women and any groups or people in society who are under-represented in the field of political thought and action.

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Introduction

We are in a quite extraordinary situation, of immense promise for the left. The Brexit referendum became an expression of massive multi-layered desire for change. Theresa May put herself at the head of all this, promising a Brexit Britain that would aid the poor and end profiteering. Then she sabotaged herself. By calling for voters to back the ‘Strong and Stable’ in her snap election, she switched to the status quo. This opened the way for Labour under Jeremy Corbyn. Its manifesto, overseen by John McDonnell, set out a clear commitment to alter the balance of power for the many not the few. The mandate of heaven – in this case the mandate of change – passed to the Opposition. It is now on the cusp of office.

If things stay as they are, all Labour needs to do is hold its breath, as the government disintegrates. It hardly needs to ‘heave’. If, that is, for the next five years the Conservatives retain today’s unhappy cabinet with its divided assemblage of transactional Remainers, bigoted Europhobes and show-the-world-our-willy globalists, led by May, the country will be Labour’s. For the present government is un-re-electable and Downing Street is certain to become the address of the current leaders of the Labour party.

But they want more than residence. They want to use the opportunity of a lifetime to transform economic policy in an egalitarian direction. To achieve this, Labour must now prepare itself in a more far-reaching fashion than its 2017 manifesto sets out, even after incorporating its important, linked call for [Alternative Models of Ownership](#) which proposes ways to democratise the economy. In his speech to conference, Jeremy Corbyn looked forward to Labour replacing neoliberalism. To achieve this demands a hegemonic approach that redefines the nature of the country’s politics, as well as economic policy.

First, I’ll sketch why a Labour government needs a hegemonic politics after it has won the election. Then, I’ll show why it must develop it well before the election to be sure of beating a possibly renewed, post-Brexit Tory party.

The Broken Hegemony of Neoliberalism

The opportunity to forge a new hegemony arises because the current hegemony, that of neoliberalism, has been shattered. Ironically, by the Brexit vote even though this came from the right.

By the ‘hegemony of neoliberalism’ I do not mean its policies of austerity, competition, privatisation and the hollowing out of the state and public sector. I mean the acceptance of them as something so natural that it is futile to challenge them: for example, the beliefs that competition is the sole source of value, that there is ‘no alternative’, that we – government and voter alike – are powerless before the domination of the market. The hegemony of neoliberalism was not the sum of its policies, it was the intangible but determining set of beliefs that put them beyond challenge by anyone ‘sensible’. Its hegemony was not what it did, but the way it defined what could be done.

It achieved this because neoliberalism is an ideology with a peculiar characteristic - it denies it is an ideology and instead pretends to be an expression of human nature. Its hegemonic power resided in its ability to persuade people it was indeed natural and therefore not open to being questioned. An example: Tony Blair telling the Labour conference in 2005 there was no point in debating globalisation, the then code word for neoliberalism, because “You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer”.

Decades of repudiation of such grotesque claims from eloquent writers across the left failed to shift their commanding influence. Nor did the fact that neoliberal policies were never popular. Nor did the financial crash of 2008 and the abysmal policies that followed. On the contrary, George Osborne’s six-year chancellorship was only possible because neoliberalism maintained its hegemony even when it was no longer delivering growth. What broke its hegemonic spell was the Brexit referendum with its endorsement of the call to ‘Take Back Control’. This refusal of powerlessness wiped away the smirks of entitlement that once transited the faces of the Remain campaign’s neoliberal managers, such

as George Osborne, David Cameron and Peter Mandelson.

It may seem surprising that a right-wing campaign achieved such an outcome. This was not the intention of the Brexit ultras who are maximalist neoliberals. For them, even the regulated space of the European Union is too much like government. But they mobilised support against UK membership by appealing to the sense of loss and powerlessness that a majority of the English experience. They managed, deceitfully, to convince them that the EU was to blame.

There is a lot that is bad about Brussels, but the failures and frustrations that haunt England and the terrible, over-centralised way the UK is governed originate in Westminster. Fear of uncontrollable ‘free movement’ however, became the signifier of the EU’s domination. It was tagged as the source of the humiliation millions felt. ‘Take Back Control’ became the mantra of the opposition to such helplessness. At one and the same time patriotic, democratic and even psychotic, ‘Take Back Control’ was also an understandable and welcome demand for self-government and therefore for the domination of the political over the economic – the very opposite of neoliberalism.

Can Labour Bring Back Control?

The tension this generates now lies at the heart of the immediate crisis the Tories are undergoing. It may also ambush Labour, whose chance to implement its alternative, egalitarian approach stems from its greater capacity to deliver on the fundamental cry of Brexit to ‘take back control’. Immigration, racism, the European Union, political correctness – yes, all these were issues – what decided their influence was the desire they encode: to be human, to have a say over one’s life, to be an agent, not to be helpless.

It was because Brexit meant this to so many voters that a majority supported its implementation, and why so many still do. They feel that whether it was right or wrong, they made a call. To deny this really would turn us into serfs of an economic order that could not be questioned.

A fresh Labour government can build on this in a positive way if it offers voters practical and honest agency. It must tackle the rage and humiliation of helplessness. It must show that the way in which it will deliver its policies will be driven by better de-centralised democracy, with the integrity to deliver more meaningful control. If it succeeds in this, it will become hegemonic. For it will then frame the terms within which its policies are implemented.

Jeremy Corbyn currently personifies the hope of realising this. Across the neoliberal decades, he was seen as a leftist irrelevance from the Blairite perspective. His manifest humanitarianism – the fact that he put people first, before money-making - made him prehistoric for those who thought the triumph of the market was the culmination of evolution itself. Today, the wilful consistency of his resistance – his decades of stubbornness - means he now embodies defiance of neoliberalism’s inhumanity. Such defiance was also the appeal of ‘take back control’ - which is why Jeremy Corbyn now represents, in its positive sense, the Brexit storm.

But here is the problem for Labour. Leaving Europe does not give us control. It is only good for hedge funds and speculators. The EU has a capitalist legal framework and pro-corporate underpinning that is more formal but in fact less powerful than Whitehall’s ruthless flexibility. Membership of the EU does not prevent the kind of national economic development Labour envisages or its democratisation (an argument I set out in [the New Statesman](#)). Instead, Brexit will make the country poorer, weaker and if anything more dependent on markets we cannot govern, the desire, indeed, of the ultra-Brexiters. Yet continent-wide issues, from climate change to migration, must be managed through shared policies based on solidarity.

What, then, stands in the way of democratic control if it is not the EU? The answer is Westminster and Whitehall: the currently existing British state. The vehicle that presents itself as the means for us to gain voice and representation and influence, through many good MPs, is in fact the prison of such aspirations.

Calling for a fair electoral system is a good way to challenge the Westminster and Whitehall regime. But they have an incredible capacity to absorb any policy. What the Labour movement and Momentum need to achieve is something that the parliamentary party alone can never do: to demystify and displace Westminster's winner-takes-all culture. It is this which vibrates and echoes through the command and control systems of Whitehall and the neoliberal market – and strips us of everyday influence. 'Winner takes all' takes power from us all, as it is monopolised by the winner. Compass can be congratulated for long advocating electoral reform as an expression of pluralism and the need for a different political culture to replace that of the UK's Empire State (see Jeremy Gilbert's recent [The Progressive Alliance, Why Labour Needs It](#)).

Westminster's twin, Whitehall, is the organiser of administration and government that accompanies legislation. Here, neoliberalism sought to replace the 'public service mandate' of the civil service with mandarins who saw their role as replacing government with 'market choice'. This was never just about privatisation. A key aspect was the idea that 'consumer choice' always produces the best possible outcomes. It led New Labour to put huge effort into trying to mimic market choice in the public realm, with Downing Street trying to impose the mantra of 'diversity, choice, contestability' on all public services. The reason this is important is that it diminishes the idea that there are other forms of decision-making: public policy, democracy, performance standards and good accountable management, which can be more valid than consumer choice alone. A networked society will only be egalitarian if people are citizens as well as consumers, that is to say citizens for life not just during elections.

A government that wishes to replace neoliberalism, must offer voters an emboldened form of citizenship that meaningfully enhances their influence. If voters are told, as they will be in the most hysterical fashion, by the press and the Tories, that Labour wants to replace their consumer choice with 'centralised bureaucracy', voters will prefer 'choice'. To counter this, Labour will need to propose much more than flaccid

tropes such as regional devolution, consultation and decentralisation.

New Labour had a case when it scorned the old routines of elite, paternalistic policy-making, which old Labour imbibed. The failure was to replace them with a competitive culture, rather than a creative and republican one. Whether the next Labour government's approach becomes hegemonic depends on its ability to refuse to default back to pre-Thatcherite routines of 'Whitehall knows best'. Instead, it needs a new political settlement that ensures that the way we carry out policies is as popular as the policies themselves. Which is why Jeremy Gilbert is right to hyper-drive his argument for electoral pluralism with a call for 'Acid Corbynism' writing, "Does anyone think that we can save the planet without radically changing our attitude to how we consume and *how we think of ourselves?*" (my italics, print edition of *New Statesman* 26 October 2017). The provocation is deliberate because shock is necessary to shake free the upside of sixties collectivism from its consumerist individualism. Perhaps 'acid citizenship' is a way to describe this welcome call for living against capitalism.

Brexit, Nationalism, and the Intangible

Which brings us to why, if Corbyn-Labour is to launch a hegemonic replacement of neoliberalism, it is imperative it sets its face against Brexit. Brexit is not just a policy; it is a form of nationalism. It makes claims about the UK's position in the world and its people. At the heart of Brexit is the claim that we can become a sovereign 'Global Britain'. This expresses a renewed if desperate desire to preserve the Empire state and its "precious union". To achieve this, Brexit demands a populist Britishness: claiming there is only one true people and the rest are saboteurs. It uses the cry of 'control' to define 'who speaks for us', and 'who we are'. The constitutional castration of real democracy by the institutions of our present democracy has its origins in the imperial form of the British state that Brexit now seeks to replenish.

Never permit your justified scorn for the wretched opportunism of such populism to underestimate its capacity to succeed. Which brings me to a difficult but vital part of the

argument. In a brilliant talk, last year, at the first World Transformed gathering in Liverpool, Ann Pettifor congratulated Labour under Corbyn for breaking the consensus on the need for austerity, as a historic achievement. But she warned that, in order to succeed, as well as challenging the blatant, tangible injustices of inequality and debt, Labour has to also tackle the intangible forces that create them, such as derivatives, financial flows and global finance. While apparently abstract, they define the terrain and shape the economy. To these intangibles, we must add democratic issues, which include the national questions of the UK as well as its broken constitution. Only if the left can address these in a way that sets the agenda, will a new era of more equal and dynamic economic and social policies be ours.

Any attempt to replace neoliberalism with something better leads in the direction of national as well as political pluralism. The intangible and the hegemonic have a clear relation to what we can call the national-patriotic.

This can be demonstrated by looking at previous turning points when a new economic hegemony was established. There is talk of Corbyn and McDonnell repeating the achievement of the Attlee government of 1945. Then, Labour's radicalism was prepared. The Beveridge Report, which set out the principle objectives of the welfare state, was published in 1942 and became a war-aim for many across the services and at home. The principles of full-employment orchestrated by a state that took responsibility for the good government of the economy were set out by Keynes and tested in the mobilisation of the domestic war-effort. This was overseen by Attlee as Deputy Prime Minister and Ernest Bevin, the ex-leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, as Minister of Labour. Both Beveridge and Keynes were liberals not socialists, a sign of the breadth of the transformation that took place before the pivotal election that ousted Churchill in 1945. Indeed the 1945 settlement began five years before, when Attlee called on Labour to enter the wartime coalition in 1940 with the words, "Life without liberty is not worth living. Let us go forward and win".

If the hope is to create a left-wing administration equal to that of 1945, we are now at our 'May 1940'. I'm not saying Brexit is a Dunkirk, I'm suggesting that Labour needs to stand for our liberty. For Attlee, this was linked to another great issue that united the left: the cause of anti-colonialism. Attlee delivered the keystone of this by insisting on the independence of India. The horrific human costs of partition never registered in the UK as part of what British rule meant because they were associated with its relinquishment. What mattered was what can be described as a process which transformed an Empire that declared war in 1939 into a country. This country was Great Britain. The Labour government was as committed to the first word 'Great', as the second. The creation of NATO, the secret development of nuclear weapons, the long wars against anti-colonial insurgencies, the hostility to the first moves towards a European sharing of sovereignty, the costs of sending troops to fight in the Korean war, the raising of charges on dentures and glasses to help pay these costs that split the government, with Aneurin Bevan resigning, that led to Labour's defeat in 1951, were all part of a contested struggle to renew British greatness, which threaded through the post-45 settlement.

Today, what is the equivalent to this national-patriotic scenario? Perhaps a more relevant comparison is in fact post-79 not post-45. For Attlee took power after the crisis of war but also with the advantages of victory, at the head of a state that had proved itself capable of total mobilisation. By contrast, Thatcher emerged from the collapse of the Keynesian order and the drawn-out crisis of the 1970s. If Jeremy Corbyn gains office between now and 2021, his inheritance will be much closer to hers, emerging from a far-reaching implosion of the society and economy.

Thatcher's settlement is now seen as socio-economic. But her international policy co-created the conditions for it. Within the global framework of the Cold War, she made an alliance with Reagan's Washington the UK's primary attachment, rather than an alliance with Europe. Then, with the Falklands victory, she appropriated Churchillism whilst destroying its all-party nature in which the trade unions had played a crucial role. Without

the Falklands War she would have been ousted by 1983, before the miners' strike. Instead, baptised by the fire of military triumph, her national-patriotic success meant she could give birth to Anglo-neoliberalism. Blair and Brown accepted its terms to give it a post-Cold War human face, with higher social spending and trademark triangulation. But Blair understood that the market followed the sword. He doubled-down on Thatcher's Washington-centred military triumphalism when he backed President Bush's invasion and occupation of Iraq. Today, we can see that their strategic failure began the loss of trust that [fed into the revolts of Brexit and Trump](#).

My point in making these comparisons is to demonstrate that when a new economic hegemony is established it always demands a reconfiguration of the 'national-patriot' – of who we are and our place in the world.

The Brexit Scenario

This connection is exactly what the Brexiteers well understand. At present the cabinet is a boil waiting to burst. Nothing is for sure in such a situation. An implosion might mean Corbyn could find himself in No 10 within a year, responsible for implementing Brexit! More hopefully, any breakdown will lead to a second referendum. It is easy to foresee a Tory disaster. But in politics, it is necessary to prepare yourself for your opponent becoming as strong as they can be. Only then can you take full advantage of their weaknesses.

A worst-case scenario for Labour would be a Tory leader who replaces May blaming the country's troubles on Europe's beastliness and calling on 'the people' to make the sacrifices necessary for patriotic independence and a 'Global Britain'. A leader, in other words, who pivots on the national-patriotic, facing down opposition in Scotland and Ireland, to unite a majority of voters around a hard-Brexit economy. The aim would be a Falklands-style renewed definition of Britishness and the final triumph of Rupert Murdoch. One that will appear to make the Tories the agents of change 'for all', whilst at the same time enforcing a regime of prurience, central authority and fear of invasion.

While Brexit broke the spirit of neoliberalism's claim that we are powerless, it did not replace it. A contest to define the new hegemony is beginning in which the right is also a seeking to replace the airless relativism of neoliberal globalisation, now that it sees this has lost consent and makes it vulnerable to an anti-capitalist left. Brexit is a Moby Dick of an issue: huge, thrashing, capable of upturning all boats.

In his conference speech, Jeremy Corbyn began to recognise this, but then drew back, as if it is all over and the whale has been beached.

There is no bigger test in politics right now than Brexit, an incredibly important and complex process, that cannot be reduced to repeating fairy stories from the side of a bus or waiting 15 months to state the obvious. As democratic socialists, we accept and respect the referendum result...

What matters in the Brexit negotiations is to achieve a settlement that delivers jobs, rights and decent living standards... a Labour Brexit that puts jobs first, a Brexit for the many, one that guarantees unimpeded access to the single market and establishes a new co-operative relationship with the EU.

Such an approach may work for now, not least by parking Labour's divisions. The danger is that it defines Brexit in terms of the tangible – of jobs, and rights and trade – and fails to see the intangible energies which it has released, which boosted Labour's leader to his current position.

For the Tories, the way to resolve the disaster they are making of Brexit is evident. They will project a Dyson & Wetherspoon vision, domestically self-governing and internationally competitive, positive about controlled immigration, profoundly hostile to Europe and lauding the UK's role in security. Yes, they may collapse under the forces of their incompetence and Brexit's immediate economic consequences. Whether they do or not, Labour will need an equally totalising narrative. Simply saying 'we can deliver a

better Brexit' hands the flag of change to the blue side. And if Labour suddenly finds itself in office trying to reverse a hard Brexit with an EU whose heads of state, satraps and bureaucrats do not take kindly to being called comrade, it will need a democratic vision all the more.

Momentum's Moment

This is where the massive increase in Labour membership, combined with Momentum, can be a game-changer with respect to the debate over what kind of country we want to be. Simply put, Labour was trapped in the logic of Westminster and parliamentary Labourism, whatever its intentions. Now it can become a social movement. The increase in members to over 500,000, huge though that is, would not be enough. They could still be sucked into constituency routines. The creation of a 30,000-strong Momentum that crosses constituencies, impressive though this is, would not be sufficient to pull an old party like Labour away from its Westminster culture. But the combination of a massive new party membership connected to an open, horizontal network is democratic dynamite for parliamentary Labourism.

Labour as a social movement that takes its energy from its pluralism, engagement with ideas, and concern for connectedness across communities, has the potential to become the source for the kind of democratic politics than can finally replace Britain's Empire State, in a way that the parliamentary party never could. As Elizabeth Hayden, who is on the Momentum National Coordinating Group [observes](#).

Movement building is a holistic process, and includes putting down roots and organising in communities all year round, developing and training members and allowing them to find their niche, building an inclusive social environment and creating spaces to discuss ideas. Above all, it's about recognising that activists can and should be allowed to mould and shape the party's political culture... The more Labour continues to innovate and experiment, opening itself up to the ideas and experiences

of its thousands of members and supporters, the more it will be ready to take power when this divided Tory government finally falls.

Such innovation and experimentation needs to develop two things. First, a democratic, networked, 21st century economic strategy capable of governing platform capitalism. One that gives people not 'control' – a demagogic and populist formulation - but a clear say over what happens to them and their communities, along with a democratic constitution that belongs to them and an educational and social culture that supports creativity. Second, a parallel, national-patriotic response to the question of 'what kind of country we want to be', in terms of Britain's place in the world, that reinforces such an internal release of energy.

If only thanks to President Trump, the American alliance has ceased to command the political imperative. Freed from wartime nostalgia, the way is open for us to abandon the obsession with greatness and embark on the normalisation of the nations of the UK, whether separately or in a genuinely confederal constitution. This inner Europeanisation is essential for the UK to replace neoliberalism. It is also the precondition for taking us back to the EU, whether together or as separate nations. And this is in turn essential because our continent will define our nature. If Europe goes populist and neo-fascist, the UK will too. If the EU is transformed into a democratic project, the UK will be democratic as well. For Europe, now as in 1940, life without liberty is indivisible. The core of any progressive foreign policy must be participation in and the chance to shape European democracy.

If you say to me, as some have, that there is no evidence of Momentum or Labour under Corbyn showing any interest in these issues, whether the specificity of England, the reinvention of Britain, alliance with the Greens, the conditions for a democratic Europe, or all the constitutional and institutional inventiveness that our time now demands, all I can say is we are just beginning. An ideas-driven Labour movement has a transformative potential in a way the

parliamentary party never had. A hegemonic potential, no less.

The opportunity can be betrayed. Labour could declare democratic reform 'boring', like the right-wing Labour apparatchiks of old. It could embrace a hopeless, residual policy of going it alone without Europe that voters will not take long to reject. If so, the party will wither on the vine of the Empire state. Time and again - to be precise, four times out of four, in 1945, 1964, 1974 and 1997 - Labour has had the opportunity to democratise the Westminster regime. If Momentum confines itself to renewing Labour 'as a party of government', rather than seeking a country that is governed differently, it can make it five out of five. But it has the energy and potential to move beyond the old British system which throttles social democracy, let alone socialism. The initiatives being developed, for example by Jon Trickett MP, point in the direction of real democracy and against the old entitlement. This alone is amazing and welcome.