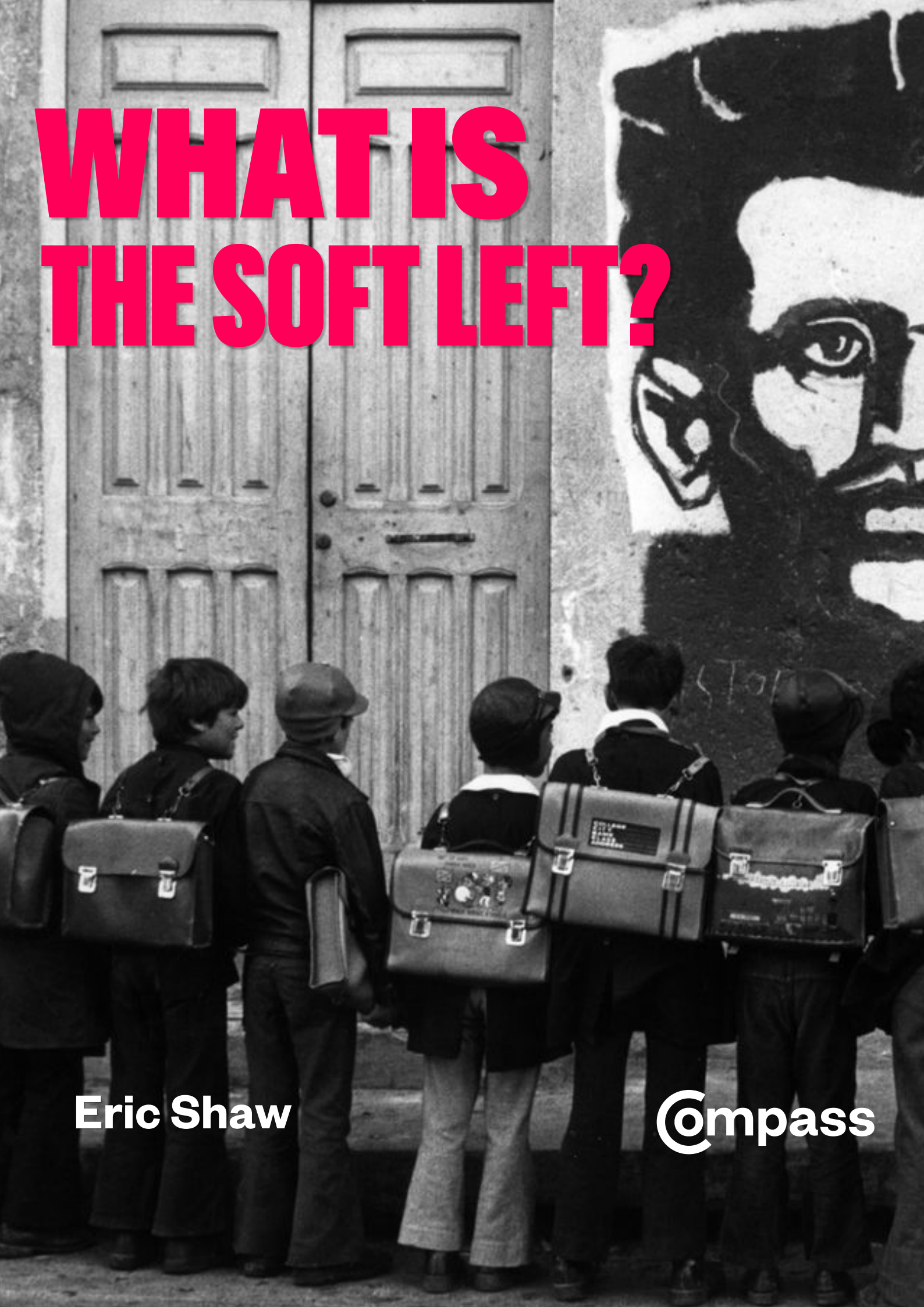


WHAT IS THE SOFT LEFT?



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Compass

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About Compass

Compass is the pressure group for a Good Society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We mobilise the progressive majority of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support, and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link those with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resource and policy we call 45 Degree Change.

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Introduction

As a right-wing dominated Labour administration struggles to govern and falls in the polls, references to the Party's 'soft left' have multiplied recently in the media. But little has been said about how this increasingly important political sphere originated, what role it has played in the party and, above all, what it stands for - or indeed whether it stands for anything distinct and important. Who is the 'Soft Left', what is it and does it have anything relevant to say? Does it constitute a distinct alternative to Labour's present leadership from the 'Labour right', and to the 'hard left' more closely related to Corbynism? This pamphlet seeks to answer these questions.

Firstly, a word on classifications. This pamphlet takes as the point of the departure three main groups or currents of opinion in the Labour Party: the 'right', the 'hard left' and the 'soft left'. Here we follow common usage but it is worth pointing out that in the party, both at parliamentary level and amongst the party membership, attitudes can more accurately be charted along a spectrum; notwithstanding distinguishing between the three groups is useful both for analytical purposes and because it reflects the fact that people tend to identify themselves, however loosely, with one of the three groups.

Characterising the soft left is not easy: it has tended to be an amorphous group, often lacking definition, organisation and coherence. The soft left is not a faction, if by that we mean a cohesive and disciplined group with its own leadership, seeking to advance its programme through organised-political activity. Such groups have existed on the soft left, including the Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC), Compass in its pre-2011 articulation, Open Labour and, most recently, Mainstream, and the resurrected Tribune Group of MPs. The soft left *per se* is better understood as a political space, inhabited by people who share certain common values and ways of looking at the world but may differ over specific policies and goals, or at least the priority given to them. For example, some place much heavier emphasis on the need for constitutional reform and a wider redistribution of power (we can call them the 'Democratic Left') than others whose overriding preoccupation is with economic and social changes and who question the need for a deep democratic change (we can call this stance 'Left Labourism').

The first section of this pamphlet will trace the emergence of the soft left in the early 1980s and then the role it played in Labour's internal politics. The second section identifies the three key principles that knit the soft left together: equality, collectivism, and pluralism. The third section addresses the crucial question of the soft left perspective on the relationship between social democracy and capitalism. The fourth section explores its strategic political perspective, its conceptions of how the ideals to which it is attached can be realised. This leads us finally to a consideration of soft left values and vision in the context of the Starmer government. The pamphlet is concluded by observations about the future of the soft left.

The Origins and Role of the Soft Left

The Labour Left has always been fissiparous, diverse in outlook and prone to internal tensions. But the split between 'hard' and 'soft' left that originated in the early 1980s has proved unusually enduring. To understand why, we need to glance at the conditions in which it occurred: the turbulent mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, when left and right in Labour were locked into a veritable civil war. The clash between rival left and right wings is, of course, as old as the party itself, but it assumed an unprecedented ferocity in this period as both engaged in a no-holds-barred struggle over ideology, policy, strategy and internal party organisation.

In fact, the party was not neatly polarised into two solid opposing blocs since neither bloc was as united or cohesive as they initially appeared. This manifested most starkly on the right with the split in 1981 between those, including a substantial number of MPs and former cabinet ministers, who seceded from the party to form the Social Democratic Party and those who chose to remain. The fragmentation of the left in contrast developed in two major stages. The first was the result of the election of the veteran left-winger Michael Foot as party leader in 1980. This was the last leadership election held under the rules when only MPs could vote and though the left (organised since 1964 in the Tribune Group) was a minority in the PLP, Foot won because, as a more conciliatory figure than his belligerent rival Denis Healey, he was seen as more likely to end the party's fratricidal conflict.

However, the acknowledged leader of the left-wing bloc, the charismatic Tony Benn, spurned Foot's efforts to calm intra-party tensions and indeed worsened them in 1981 by challenging Healey for the deputy leadership of the party. In the decisive second ballot of the contest, the first to use the new electoral college in which unions and party members could participate as well as MPs, a significant number of left-wing MPs loyal to Foot, including Neil Kinnock, abstained - delivering a wafer-thin victory to Healey. This provoked furious recriminations between the Foot loyalists of the left and what had come to be known as the 'Bennite left'. The second stage that followed was the Bennite left then itself fracturing. This was in part because of disagreement over whether to co-operate with the newly elected leader, Neil Kinnock, who succeeded Foot in 1983; but it mainly revolved over whether to back Kinnock's determination to eject the Militant Tendency from the party.

Militant was a Trotskyist organisation which had for years practised the 'entryist' tactic of infiltrating the Labour Party with the object of seizing control of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and other structures, as it did most successfully in Liverpool. It was highly sectarian, controlled secretly by the Revolutionary Socialist League, and had few qualms over the methods it used, including orchestrated abuse of opponents and even intimidation. In 1982, Foot - and then more forcefully Kinnock - decided to take disciplinary action against Militant by proscribing the organisation and expelling its leadership groups from the party. One section of the Bennite coalition, led by Benn himself and

including many of his supporters (one of which was Jeremy Corbyn), was adamantly opposed to this, describing it as a ruthless 'purge' of those who at worst were 'erring socialist comrades'.

The other section of the Bennite coalition, in contrast, agreed with the leadership that the Militant Tendency was a dangerous and disruptive body whose aims were incompatible with those of the party and hence backed disciplinary action. They formed a majority on the LCC, which had been established in 1978 to act as the umbrella organisation for the party's left and had been initially close to Benn. Working with those MPs who abstained in the deputy leadership contest, the LCC became the main organised extra-parliamentary focus of what now became known as the 'soft left'; the rest of the Bennite left was dubbed 'the hard left.' At the same time its more left-wing MPs quit the Tribune Group of MPs, a soft left body, to form the hard left Socialist Campaign Group (SCG).

By the mid-1980s, a clear soft left leadership group had emerged in Parliament, including Robin Cook, Bryan Gould, Michael Meacher and John Prescott, as well as outside Parliament, such as Sheffield Council leader David Blunkett (who later became an MP and Home Secretary), the senior trade unionist Tom

Sawyer (later General Secretary of the party) and from the LCC, Peter Hain, John Denham, and Harriet Harman (all later MPs), as well as the academic Paul Thompson.

Beyond the stance on Militant, the gap between the soft and hard left gradually widened to encompass matters of ideology, policy, strategy and party organisation. As a result

the occasional attempts at a rapprochement failed. In the early part of his leadership, Kinnock, as he struggled to assert mastery over the party, relied heavily on the soft left to deliver majorities in key party bodies, such as the National Executive Committee (NEC). By the late-1980s, prominent soft left MPs, including those mentioned above, had become senior frontbenchers; for a time the soft left operated as the pivot of the party between its hard and right wings.

This was the high point of the soft left's influence which then began to recede. Since the early-1980s Labour had been slowly tilting to the right, a process accelerated with the emergence in the late-1980s of a new group of ambitious and highly capable MPs, notably Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who were resolved, in their language, to 'modernise' Labour (read: accelerate the abandonment of left-wing policies). This inevitably caused friction with the soft left over key issues, notably economic policy, employment relations policy and, for a time, defence. After Kinnock's resignation from the leadership following Labour's unexpected defeat at the 1992 general election, Bryan Gould stood on a soft left ticket in the subsequent leadership election against the

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obvious heir-apparent John Smith, but was heavily defeated². Smith's leadership was cut short by his sudden death two years later and in the following leadership contest Blair swept to victory. Blair, Brown and their followers then reinvented the party as 'New Labour', in effect wrenching it smartly to the right. In the subsequent Blair and Brown governments between 1997-2010, soft leftists Robin Cook, John Prescott, Clare Short, Michael Meacher, Peter Hain and John Denham amongst others held ministerial positions - but their influence over the broad direction of the party was minimal. Indeed, by the late-1990s the soft left had lost much of its cohesion and its influence shrank whilst, in the wider party, the LCC disbanded as the dominance of New Labour looked complete³.

The soft left began to re-emerge during Blair's second term as PM (2001-2005). Firstly, because it opposed British participation in the Iraq War in 2003, which precipitated the resignations of Cook, Short and Denham from ministerial positions, but also due to its growing reservations over some of the government's domestic policies - especially marketising and commercialising of public service delivery. The launch of Compass in 2003 as a soft left Labour vehicle (albeit one with pluralist instincts) marked a return of the soft left. Soft left criticisms were widely shared in the party at the time, which helps explain the surprise victory of the soft left Ed Miliband over his more Blairite elder brother, David, in the leadership election after Gordon Brown resigned as Prime Minister following Labour's 2010 electoral defeat.

The soft left now held the reins of the party, formally at least. Ed Miliband was never part of the organised soft left and though he subscribed to many soft left beliefs he was lukewarm about others; particularly deepening democracy, not just over constitutional and electoral reform but also as applied more broadly to the economic and public spheres. Despite his election, the new leader's position was never fully secure as he inherited a party whose right was strongly embedded in the PLP; he surrounded himself with senior frontbench colleagues who resented his elevation over what they considered to be their better claims and they constantly, damagingly (though anonymously) briefed against him.

Miliband resigned after the unanticipated loss in the 2015 general election. But rather than swinging to the right in response to what the party right depicted as 'Ed's lurch to the left', to the astonishment of all and the consternation and dismay of many in the PLP, he was replaced by a representative of the hard left: Jeremy Corbyn. This unleashed a second period of fratricidal strife, releasing a process of polarisation with the right in the party which squeezed out and marginalised the soft left.

But though the soft left had very modest representation on the NEC and other elected party bodies, and was poorly organised, evidence

then emerged that at the grassroots level it enjoyed a great deal of support. In 2018, a new organisation, Labour Together, led by Morgan McSweeney, commissioned research into the views of Labour party members. Shortly after this, McSweeney was appointed to head Keir Starmer's campaign in the 2020 leadership contest that followed Corbyn's resignation. The Starmer platform he helped to write was expressly designed to appeal to the soft left as research indicated that it formed the largest part of the membership⁴.

Once elected, Starmer shredded most of his platform and party policy was placed on a firmly right-wing trajectory. Notwithstanding, soft leftists were not without influence. Angela Rayner won the contest for the deputy leadership at the same time, which gave her an independent power base, and she was given a senior frontbench position. Other soft leftists such as Ed Miliband, Lisa Nandy, Louise Haigh and Lucy Powell were also appointed to the shadow (and subsequently the actual) cabinet.

However, their positions were soon under threat. Almost immediately after Labour's return to government, 'anonymous sources' began to brief against soft left ministers (the hard left had been excluded from the Cabinet). Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero, resisted persistent efforts to relegate him to a lesser role, helped perhaps by his personal links with Starmer. Lisa Nandy, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, also retained her position in the cabinet, but a misdemeanour was used as an excuse to remove Louise Haigh as Secretary of State for Transport. Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner contrived her own resignation following a tax affair scandal whilst Lucy Powell, Leader of the House, was summarily sacked in the reshuffle that followed Rayner's resignation in September 2025.

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Although all these developments were framed by party sources as part of an effort to diminish the soft left, they had the paradoxical effect of raising its profile in the media. Furthermore, Angela Rayner's resignation as Labour's deputy leader had created a vacancy and, in the subsequent contest, the recently ejected Lucy Powell defeated the more centrist Bridget Phillipson, the Education Secretary, despite the best efforts of No. 10. This was not the only indication of strong soft left sentiment in the constituency parties. Soft left politicians (headed by Miliband) regularly topped approval rating polling for cabinet ministers of Labour members⁵. Meanwhile, the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham had been on a journey from Blairism to a soft left politics defined by a mix of innovative state intervention and a grasp of pluralism. Burnham, the only Labour politician in the country with positive approval ratings, had become the party's favourite to succeed

Starmer.

The focus of Compass on Labour, following its big but shallow win in 2024, had been apparent after it took over responsibility for the long standing quasi-academic journal *Renwal*, founded by the LCC after the election defeat of 1992. Then, in May 2025, Compass dedicated its 'Change: How? A Decade of Radical Renewal' conference to the future of the party with Mark Drakeford, Lou Haigh, Miatta Fahnbulleh and Andy Burnham as keynote speakers.

Discussion had been underway for some time about improving the organisation and effectiveness of the soft left and they bore fruit in autumn 2025. September of that year saw two soft left organisations, Compass, and Open Labour, come together to form a new soft left body focused on the Labour Party: *Mainstream*. *Mainstream* seeks to galvanise the broad majoritarian soft left bloc in the party that McSweeney had earlier identified and subsequently abandoned. It commenced the process of organising both in the PLP and the constituencies, starting with a slate for Labour's NEC. At the same time, the traditional home of the parliamentary soft left, the *Tribune Group of MPs*, long sunk in lethargy, was refounded and re-energised, and by early 2026 could boast a membership of over 100.

While there is much overlap between the *Tribune Group* and *Mainstream*, the former can be described as 'left Labourist', as many of its leading MP lights reject the switch to proportional representation, while *Mainstream* sees democratic reform as critical to economic transformation - what could be called a Democratic Left position.

One purpose of the establishment of *Mainstream*, according to some commentators, was to operate as a launching pad for a future leadership bid by Andy Burnham. This required his return to the Commons and in January 2026 the sitting Labour MP for the Manchester constituency of Gorton and Denton announced he was resigning. Burnham indicated that he was prepared to stand in the subsequent by-election, but Number 10 took fright, directing the NEC to use its powers to block him from standing: testimony to the threat to Starmer posed by Burnham. But while Burnham signed up to the launch statement of *Mainstream*, the organisation - because of its democratic membership base and rules - would ballot on any candidate they would officially endorse in any leadership contest, as seen with the deputy leadership in late 2025. The organisation recently gave a prominent platform to former Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner to set out her critique of the government⁶.

All this shows how fast politics now changes. In 2024, the veteran soft leftist and former cabinet minister John Denham had lamented that 'Labour's soft left is now more obvious in its absence than its presence' and that it was difficult to discern any 'prominent individual advocates, any form of coherent organisation, a body of intellectual work... that

could claim the title. It was at its weakest for 50 years', if 'it can be said to exist in any meaningful form at all'⁷. Within a year events had disproved this; the soft left's influence and reach in the party was patently growing. As speculation about a possible replacement to Starmer began to grow, three of the four possible successors most often mentioned were from the soft left: Burnham, Miliband and Rayner (a fourth from the Blairite right was Health Secretary Wes Streeting).

The furore over the Epstein-Mandelson scandal, and the resignation of McSweeney as Starmer's chief of staff, gravely weakened the right of the party and has opened the door to potentially much greater soft left influence. But what might this mean?

The Soft Left's Ideological Profile

So far we have traced the origins and evolution of the soft left, but the key questions are 'what does it stand for?' and 'has it anything distinctive to offer for the party and the country?'. Here we face a problem: there is no authoritative statement of what the soft left represents. In developing my interpretation, I have drawn heavily on the ideas and analyses of those who have been (a) soft left politicians of some prominence within the party, and (b) have written extensively: those who did not inevitably leave a lesser imprint. This is supplemented by the publications of the soft left organisation, Compass.

The emphasis of the pamphlet is less on policy postures or detailed policy proposals than on the principles that animate them, which constantly recurred in soft left contributions over the last nearly 50 years and which structured its responses to particular problems. These are equality, collectivism and pluralism, which encompass a more democratic, decentralised and non-tribal politics.

1. Equality

As Tony Crosland, the major theoretician of social democracy, stated: socialism was all about equality. Precisely what was meant by this has always been a matter for debate and controversy. But that disparities in the apportionment of income, wealth and life-chances were far wider than could possibly be economically justified - and ought therefore to be compressed - was a proposition very widely endorsed.

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That is, until the arrival of New Labour. For New Labour leaders, a major reduction in material inequalities was neither feasible nor particularly desirable since such an objective, in their view, neglected the importance of rewarding effort and talent, encouraging initiative and incentivising entrepreneurial risk-taking. Labour's aim, they concluded, should not be a more equal but a more meritocratic society; that is one where everyone should be able to compete on a more equal basis for the prizes society had to offer. Major social and economic inequalities would thus remain. Since reducing disparities in income and wealth was not a New Labour goal it is not surprising that, whilst instances of poverty and deprivation fell, levels of inequality did not.

For the soft leftist Ed Miliband, elected leader in 2010, New Labour's lack of interest in redressing inequality was a major failing. He believed fervently that 'large inequalities of income and wealth scar our society', that they were entirely unjustified and damaged social cohesion⁸. However, he did not regard the traditional redistributory method of recycling the proceeds of economic growth through taxation to finance expanded public programmes and increase cash transfers as either adequate or indeed feasible in fiscally straightened circumstances.

Equally he did not share the hard left belief that the precondition of a more equal society was major extension of public ownership; rather his strategy was to alter the rules and reshape the institutions that governed the way capitalism operated⁹. His chosen means was 'predistribution'; that is, securing a more equal distribution of economic power prior to government tax and benefit measures.

The concept of 'predistribution' was drawn from the work of the American political scientist Jacob Hacker. His primary thesis is that inequality should be tackled at its source by reforming the rules, institutional arrangements, and corporate governance and reward regimes that structured the operation of markets. This would create a 'responsible' against a 'predatory' form of capitalism. A series of measures were floated to provide a practical application of 'predistribution', including enhancing the bargaining power of wage-earners, steps to curb excessive corporate pay and measures to democratise corporate governance¹⁰.

But incorporating such measures into party policy proved difficult. Powerful forces on the right of the party were very uncomfortable with any policies that challenged the power and prerogatives of capital and therefore risked alienating big business, whose endorsement was deemed essential if Labour's economic policies were to be seen as credible. Unable to muster the strength to overcome such resistance, Miliband compromised and watered down his programme; all talk of a more 'responsible' capitalism and predistribution disappeared from the party's programme. However, he did not entirely abandon his egalitarian aspirations; the 2015 manifesto contained a raft of redistributive measures, including a 50p tax rate on higher incomes, the so-called 'mansion tax' on houses worth more than £2 million, the tax on bankers' bonuses and the abolition of non-dom tax exemptions. Indeed, these measures were regarded as too sweeping and extreme by party right-wingers and were blamed by them, in part at least, for Labour's defeat in 2015.

The Corbyn interlude that intervened returned Labour to an avowedly and unequivocally egalitarian agenda, but this proved to be a transient as the party swung back to the right under Starmer and his Chancellor Rachel Reeves. Their overriding priority was raising growth rates and they were less concerned about compressing inequality or even alleviating poverty and distress. This inevitably led to serious dissatisfaction on the soft left, as was seen by a series of revolts in the PLP over the means-testing of winter fuel benefits and attempted reductions in benefit payments for disabled people.

2. Collectivism

This brings us to the second soft left value, collectivism. Collectivism, as we use the term, has two aspects. Firstly, a commitment to publicly provided essential goods and services according to need, free at the

point of consumption and to be funded by a progressive tax system. Secondly, the belief that these goods and services must be delivered by public sector organisations. This belief rested on a distinction between two domains of the market and the public. In the former, behaviour was rooted in a code based on market exchange and corporate profit-maximisation; in the latter, by one anchored, as the soft left thinker David Marquand put it, in the principles of equity, public service and altruism¹¹. As such the soft left is critical of capital, aiming to socialise and contain it where necessary.

This double-faceted notion of collectivism was a matter of consensus in the Labour Party until, that is, the arrival of New Labour and its programme of public service 'reform' or 'modernisation'. This programme accepted the first facet of collectivism but not the second. It was grounded in two axioms: the first was that as long as goods and services were provided according to need and not the ability to pay it did not matter whether the organisation delivering them was public or private; the second was that public sector organisations as monopoly providers tended by nature to be

sluggish, bureaucratic and run in the interest of producers - only the spur of competition would boost efficiency, standards and receptivity to service users.

The spur of competition was added in either of two ways: the outsourcing or privatisation of public services and the introduction of internal markets. Examples of outsourcing included the use of private, profit-making firms to deliver NHS ophthalmic procedures; and the replacement of public procurement of

infrastructure by the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) where private companies competed for contracts to design, build, finance and operate hospitals, schools and other projects. 'Internal markets' took the form of the introduction to public organisations of complex, detailed targets and performance indicators to act as proxy price signals and to 'incentivise performance'¹².

The soft left objected to these measures on two grounds. Firstly, it regarded collectivism as an end as well as a means, in that it institutionalised co-operation, altruism and public service as principles of social organisation and motivation. Thus, whilst the soft left praised the New Labour government for major increases in spending on public services, it attacked a 'reform' agenda, whose effect was to fragment public services, make collaborative working more difficult, undermine trust and squander money on the costs of introducing internal markets. Secondly, soft leftists did not accept that public organisations would

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only operate effectively only under the pressure of markets or by privatising them. They were especially critical of PFI schemes which, Gould charged, 'quite unnecessarily and wastefully spent billions, saddling future generations of taxpayers with massive debts, for the sake of an ideologically driven preference for private business as opposed to public provision'¹³.

Both Miliband and Corbyn disowned New Labour-style 'reform', supporting the re-integration of core and ancillary services into the public sector, the ending of internal markets and the replacement of competition by co-operation. Initially, in his earliest pronouncements, it seemed that Starmer would follow suit. Instead, the Labour government has offered a mixed bag with more Blairite reforms under Wes Streeting in health but more statist solutions to education under Bridget Phillipson.

3. Pluralism

The third soft left principle is pluralism. If the hard left would sign up to a greater equality and collectivism, few in its ranks had seen pluralism as essential. Since the post-war Labour government, British social democracy had been heavily associated with a statist, centralising approach to policy in the organisation of nationalised industries, in the structure of public services and in its pattern of decision-making. Ever more powers and responsibilities were piled upon the state but with little thought given to how people experienced policies or how they responded to their minimal role in framing them. As the one-time Labour MP Tony Wright put it, 'Centralism and uniformity triumphed over decentralism and diversity'¹⁴. Although New Labour preached the language of empowerment, devolution aside (a cast-iron commitment inherited from John Smith) its propensity in practice was to favour top-down government. In 2006, Meacher admonished the Blair government for presiding over a steady drift towards concentrated and unaccountable state power, an ever-stronger executive branch, weakening legislative oversight and increasingly enfeebled local authorities¹⁵.

But, as Peter Hain pointed out, there has always been an alternative tradition of socialism that was 'libertarian, empowering and decentralised'¹⁶. This democratic and decentralist tradition was particularly associated with GDH Cole¹⁷ who criticised the alienating, disempowering effects of Labour's centralised, bureaucratic version of social democracy and urged more participatory forms of organisation both at the workplace and in the wider political realm¹⁸. The soft left has followed this tradition and called for a new approach that encourages greater decentralisation of decision-making. This approach rests on two premises. The first is that people should have the right to have as much control over their own lives as possible: the more they have a sense of agency or competence the less likely will they be to feel disenfranchised and disregarded – and hence seduced by the siren

calls of radical right populism. As soft left leading light Sue Goss puts it, people 'have a right to be part of conversations about their own lives'¹⁹. The second is that centralised decision-making will improve the quality of the decisions being made because ordinary people will be able to contribute their own experiences and insights and not simply be treated as the objects of public policy.

Decentralisation as a political principle has, for the soft left, taken two forms: devolution and popular empowerment. Devolution here refers to a delegation of power which is extended further than the three devolved nations to regional and local authorities, including the new mayoralities. Neal Lawson has called for '45° Change', the blending of the 'vertical' with the 'horizontal', that is a joint approach to policy-making which combines the use of the powers of the central state, for example in industrial and energy policy, with a recognition of the valuable role of local and regional initiatives²⁰.

Here, Andy Burnham has been at the forefront of the movement for devolution, using his own experiences to coin the concept of 'Manchesterism': the vigorous use of the power of the mayoralty to grapple with social and regional inequalities, low growth and lack of innovation. Even more could be achieved, he has argued, if tight and detailed systems of control over spending by the Treasury were eased and sub-national authorities given far more control over education and skills, housing, and infrastructure together with a much-needed strengthening of their fiscal basis. Decentralisation could be given added force, he proposes, by the replacement of the House of Lords with an elected senate of nations and regions²¹.

Popular empowerment reflects the belief that people ought to have greater autonomy and freedom to shape their own lives²². Evidence of people's ability and willingness to engage in the democratic process is provided by the fact that as many as one in four people participate in numerous voluntary organisations²³. As part of a process of greater community empowerment, Compass has called for the greater use of citizens' juries and Citizen (or Deliberative) Assemblies. Citizens' juries are small-scale, and best suited for local or neighbourhood decisions. Citizens' Assemblies are larger with up to a hundred members often chosen by lot and, with the help of experts, deliberate over issues of both local and national importance²⁴. In all this the soft left would take a position of being 'in and against the state' as articulated by the likes of Hilary Wainwright.

At the heart of the soft left adherence to deepening democracy and pluralism is a commitment to proportional representation. There are three main justifications for this. First, because it's difficult to justify the label 'democratic' to a voting system which, at the 2024 election, delivered Labour 63.2% of the seats on 34.7% of the vote. Second, First Past the Post in effect orphans a majority of citizens across the country whose votes are either taken for granted, because they have

no choice but to vote for the least bad option, or are simply wasted. This builds resentment over time leading to both polarisation and support for populism. Third, because PR creates the basis for the latent progressive majority in this country to become activated and translated into a transformative governing political agenda.

The crucial insight of the soft left is that the state as it is cannot simply be occupied and its levers pulled for more left-wing outcomes. The very nature of the centralised state combines with the voting system to make anything social democratic that confronts the power of capital much more onerous. To change society, the soft left would argue, means we have to change the system. This takes us onto the central question of the relationship between society and capital.

Social Democracy and Capitalism

A key question for Labour throughout its existence is the extent to which its goals can be realised within the structures of British capitalism. This is an immensely complicated question so this pamphlet will confine itself to a few observations. Much of the discussion within the Labour Party has revolved around the precise role and reach of the market. Indeed, the fundamental aim of social democracy since its inception has been to curb and constrain the operations and impact of market forces in favour of the working class. But by how much and to what extent should the market be replaced as the key mechanism for apportioning resources and co-ordinating economic activities?

Right and left in the party have always differed in their response to these questions, with the former favouring accommodation with the market and the latter calling for greater collective control over the economy. This latter stance was reflected in the late 1970s by the

promulgation of the so-called 'alternative economic strategy' (AES) which called for a major extension of public ownership, much greater planning and much stricter controls over the economy. This, to a considerable degree, has remained the standpoint of the hard left; the soft left, in contrast, from the mid-1980s developed a more nuanced and less hostile attitude

to markets²⁵. Thus, in 1987 Michael Meacher wrote that there was 'no socialist objection to the technical conception of a market' and called for the 'taboo' over the market 'to be exorcised once and for all'²⁶. As Bryan Gould, who was a key player in these earlier debates, later reflected 'no government should delude itself as to the critical and irreplaceable role of the market in a modern and democratic economy', essential in co-ordinating economic transactions, allocating scarce resources, stimulating innovation and enterprise, and empowering consumers²⁷.

Overlooked by New Labour was the fact that capitalism, most certainly in its free-wheeling British form, caused ever greater inequalities, precarious working conditions for many, and disruptive economic oscillations.

Though the soft left rejected the 'blanket anti-capitalism of the hard left' it was far more sceptical than New Labour about the liberalised economy bequeathed by the Conservatives. Overlooked by New Labour was the fact that capitalism, most certainly in its free-wheeling British form, caused ever greater inequalities, precarious working conditions for many, and disruptive economic oscillations. 'Markets' as Gould pointed out, 'are valuable servants but dangerous masters'²⁸. The soft left was in particular critical of New Labour's support for the financialisation of the economy which, in the words of the then head of the Financial Services Authority Adair Turner, had led to a 'swollen' financial sector, many of whose activities were 'socially useless'²⁹. Financialisation was exemplified by Blair and Brown's enthusiasm for 'light-touch' financial regulation which not only allowed the wealthy

to siphon off increasing amounts of wealth but also had profoundly destabilising consequences for the economy³⁰. 'The financial system', Hain maintained, had become 'a gambling emporium' rather than a means of supplying investment for productive purpose; and the relaxed regulatory rules implemented by the Blair government greatly contributed to the UK's intense exposure to global financial turbulence culminating in the 2008 crash³¹.

With Miliband's election to the leadership the soft left was in a position to have a major influence over the formulation of economic policy. We have already noted his comparison between 'predatory' and 'responsible' capitalism. This drew upon the distinction common in the relevant literature between two 'variants of capitalism'; on the one hand, the neoliberal and heavily financialised Anglo-American model and, on the other, the more co-ordinated and socially regulated model found in Northern Europe. The former, 'predatory' capitalism in Miliband's terminology, was characterised by short-term profit, dividend maximisation, asset-stripping and an inflated, weakly regulated financial sector prone to wild speculative gyrations. The latter, or 'responsible' capitalism, was defined by long-term productive investment, more inclusive corporate governance structures, superior welfare systems and above all significantly lower levels of inequality. With this critique of 'predatory capitalism' Miliband reasserted traditional social democratic themes, such as the damaging effects of the obsession with maximising shareholder value to the disregard of wider social responsibilities and the preference for financial speculation over productive investment. Much of his analysis was close to the ideas expounded in a series of books by the influential centre-left economic commentator Will Hutton, with his stakeholder model of capitalism. Miliband and other soft left commentators, such as Peter Hain in his book *Back to the Future of Socialism*, also called for a more proactive, entrepreneurial role for the state in investment decisions, the establishment of a British Investment Bank, and energetic industrial and regional policies, as well as 'predistribution' measures such as those discussed above.

Miliband's object was to persuade the party to adopt a programme geared to moving towards the stakeholder model of capitalism. What few seemed to notice was that Miliband was the first senior left-winger to explicitly embrace a capitalist economy, albeit the Nordic variant of it. Instead, his critics on the right of the party, their voices amplified in the right-wing press, professed alarm at Miliband's temerity in launching a critique of capitalism and at what they construed as his egregious indifference towards the rapprochement with business, deemed to be one of New Labour's principal achievements. His authority drained by poor poll ratings, beset by malevolent coverage from the right-wing press and the sniping of internal critics including his Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ed Balls, Miliband felt he had no option but to retreat; references to 'predatory capitalism' disappeared from Labour's lexicon.

Under Corbyn, the party took a sharp swerve to the left, but this was completely reversed under Starmer. Once account is taken of very different circumstances there seems to be a considerable degree of continuity between the overall approach to the economy taken by Starmer and Reeves and their New Labour predecessors - though with two qualifications. As free market orthodoxies have lost some of their lustre in the wake of the financial crisis, the Starmer government adopted a more interventionist approach to industrial and especially (under Miliband's oversight as Secretary of State for Energy and Net Zero) energy policy. The second departure from New Labour is the commitment - which Angela Rayner played a key role in sustaining - to enhancing employee and trade union rights. Continuity with New Labour (and the Conservatives) is most marked in government support for the retention of a highly financialised economy. Indeed, under pressure from the City and despite warnings from eminent economists and financial regulators, it appears to be unlearning the lessons of the financial crash by relaxing the regulations imposed on the financial sector - with consequences for economic resilience and stability it may well live to regret, and deeply so.

Today it is Andy Burnham, alongside think tanks such as Common Wealth, who is leading the debate on the soft left for a new political economy via what has been described as 'Manchesterism'. His pre-2025 Labour Party conference interview in the *New Statesman*³² and subsequent speeches have set out an agenda which mixes public ownership and democratic reform as essential components of a strategy designed to redress the cost-of-living crisis. Burnham argues that only long-term control of key aspects of people's lives such as housing and transport can reduce prices. But such a long-term investment agenda requires a political consensus which can only be gained via proportional representation.

The Soft Left, Strategy and 'Radical Pragmatism'

What then of the soft left's political strategy? Denham differentiated its approach from 'the hard left's optimism that socialist policies would be popular if only asserted sufficiently clearly and the right-wing minimalism that limits ambitions to what voters tell focus groups they want'³³. The hard left is faulted for its naïve presumption that its policies are self-evidently in the interests of a working class who only had to be exposed to them to rally behind them³⁴. The right are censured for its proclivity for focus group-filtered policy-making both because its willingness to sacrifice principle and policy effectiveness to electoral expediency is an essentially frivolous approach to politics - and because it is self-defeating. It merely confirmed voters' cynicism that politicians were 'in it for themselves': if they are prepared to play fast and loose with their own principles, how could they ever be trusted?

In place of both of these options Lawson has called for 'radical pragmatism'. Pragmatic because it recognises the need to be realistic and think strategically about winning votes from where people are, not where you wish them to be, and radical because it is geared to a programme of social transformation: 'accepting we must reconnect with the public, but with a plan about where to lead them to and how, and which builds the power of the Left'³⁵. From this perspective a political strategy is not solely about winning votes, it is also about the realisation of a project: as, for example, the successful neoliberal one developed by Mrs Thatcher who understood the value of engaging with public opinion in order to reshape it. She appreciated the importance of what Stuart Hall called exercising 'ideological power', that is the power 'to signify events in a particular way', to alter 'collective social understandings' and thereby to facilitate political persuasion and mobilisation³⁶. She was able to seed neoliberal ideas in popular consciousness to the extent that they acquired the status of 'common-sense', the 'taken-for-granted assumptions of public discussion'³⁷. It is a precedent that Labour should follow.

Succeeding in the battle of ideas for the soft left entails challenging neoliberal definitions of social and economic problems. This means that policies must be framed, that is formulated, in a way that explains why particular problems have arisen, who is responsible for them and why the proposed remedial actions are the most appropriate. It means grasping that popular understanding of problems is always mediated by ideas and it is the struggle for supremacy over rival sets of ideas that can often be decisive in shaping people's views. Unfortunately, the Starmer leadership and its strategists, as soft left critics have pointed out, have been all too willing to accept the definitions and framing of its opponents, above all over immigration; but also to a degree over questions of social welfare and economic growth. The results, in the contest for public opinion, have been predictably very disappointing.

Furthermore, the soft left argues Labour can no longer rely on class and party identities to enlist mass support. Not only has the party's traditional working-class base shrunk in size, it has lost its cohesion and

its allegiance to Labour has become far more fragile, with considerable numbers defecting to the radical right – a common trend throughout the Western world. While class still matters, it can no longer operate as the main agency for social change. For these reasons the soft left, and Compass in particular, has developed the concept of the progressive alliance, designed to appeal to multiple people with a progressive cast of mind irrespective of party - 'It is first and foremost an alliance of minds and hearts'³⁸. It is about creating a historic bloc of those sympathetic to progressive policies, one sufficiently robust not only to win a majority but to overcome resistance by vested interests: 'The test of a political party today is not its ability to deliver a narrow set of technocratic policies from the top down, but its capacity to build the coalitions - both electoral and social - needed to drive deep, lasting change'³⁹.

In 2011, Compass transformed its operation from being solely Labour to welcoming Greens, Liberal Democrats and people of all stripes who backed its call for a Good Society - one that was much more equal, democratic and sustainable. The organisation anticipated the fragmentation of the party system which today feels like a permanent feature of the political landscape. In such terrain what is required is the negotiation across

the progressive parties of a platform and an electoral strategy that can reverse the steady shift to the right. By appealing to the latent progressive majority within the country (in only one election since 1979 has the right vote been larger than the left vote) a progressive alliance could win office on a platform that offered meaningful change to people's lives, rather than accommodation with the interests of the already rich and powerful. The soft left see both the instrumental and intrinsic values of pluralism, to both combine progressive forces and benefit from an analysis which brings together social democratic, green and liberal perspectives into a richer mix capable of dealing with the complexity and chaos of the 21st century.

But the soft left would go further, recognising the need for extra-parliamentary forces to be mobilised to support and hold to account the more transformative left-green government that would be facing the hostility of conservative and national populist forces.

[The progressive alliance] is about creating a historic bloc of those sympathetic to progressive policies, one sufficiently robust not only to win a majority but to overcome resistance by vested interests

Values, Vision and the Starmmer Government

A strategy for radical social change requires a project. Projects require four components: the first a clear set of values, the second a vision of the future, third a programme or set of policies which can give effect to both the values and the vision and, fourth, leadership and wider countervailing forces that can bring the previous three to life. The third is out with the purposes of this pamphlet, so in what follows we concentrate on values and vision – with a word about leadership and wider extra-parliamentary forces.

Earlier we identified the three key soft left values as equality, collectivism and pluralism. To what extent do they suggest a different ideological trajectory to that being followed by the Starmer government? With the caveat that we are less than two years into the expected life span of the government we look at the three soft left values and take a first stab at looking at the degree to which they appear to influence government policy.

Earlier we made a distinction between equality and meritocracy; we now suggest that it is a blurred one with considerable overlap. Starmer's rhetoric and that of the leadership in general has been unashamedly meritocratic in the sense it emphasises that barriers that impede the ability of all to realise their talents should be removed, and that these barriers include inequalities in access to good education, healthcare and, more generally, child poverty. His ideal appears to be a society where the keys to advancement are ability and hard work, not inherited wealth and privilege. Since this ideal overlaps with its egalitarian agenda, the soft left has praised the various government initiatives to relieve child poverty, improve overall standards of education and create more equal access to healthcare. In other words, there is agreement that large disparities in life-enhancing opportunities clog social mobility and should be evened out. In addition, policies such as the abolition of the non-dom rule, the mansion tax and the tightening of some inheritance laws reflect a recognition that the rich can contribute more, though these are very modest steps. But the government's ambitions seem to stretch no further even though the last few decades have witnessed an ever-greater concentration of income and especially wealth in the hands of a narrow elite. According to the Labour MP Liam Byrne, between 2010 and 2021 the wealth of the top 1% had increased 31 times more than that of those in the bottom 99% and they now possess 25% of the total wealth⁴⁰. Furthermore, taxes on wealth have hardly risen either as a proportion of total taxation or of national income, not least because of multiple exemptions, reliefs and ubiquitous tax avoidance schemes⁴¹.

Greater equality requires, as Miliband understood, reforming the structural generators of inequality in terms of corporate governance, patterns of property ownership, ineffective forms of financial regulation, wealth taxes and a serious effort to clamp down on rampant tax avoidance. But there is a major contrast between Miliband and Starmer: for the former, and the soft left in general, massive

inequalities in the distribution of income, wealth and power are a matter of acute concern – a major social and economic problem. There is no evidence that the Prime Minister thinks in these terms. Indeed, Labour’s ‘Ming Vase strategy’ in opposition hinged on the avoidance of initiatives which challenged the power and privileges of the major corporations, financial institutions and the wealthy in general. This caution reflects electoral considerations but also the absence of any real commitment to a more equal society. For the present leadership meritocracy is the ideal; for the soft left it is emphatically not. By legitimating the wealth of the ‘high achievers’ meritocracy consolidates a steeply hierarchical, unjust and elitist society; and by stigmatising and eroding the self-esteem of those deemed to have ‘failed’ it not only inflicts injury on their health and personal wellbeing but seriously corrodes social cohesion and the sense of participating in a shared life⁴².

We have defined collectivism in terms of two aspects. The provision of essential goods and services based on need and not the ability to pay, and the delivery of those services by public sector organisations governed by the ethos of public service, co-operation and altruism. The Starmer government is committed to the former though with a significant caveat. Whilst it understands that the public services have been starved of resources for years it is reluctant to commit the large injections of money needed to secure sustained improvement. Instead the combination of its fiscal rules and, in particular, its reluctance to raise taxation on those with broadest shoulders finds the Starmer government in a position in which it feels impelled to exert tighter control over public spending. Due to internal party opposition, it was forced to retreat in its efforts to restrict access to winter fuel allowances and incapacity benefits but in the absence of willingness to act on taxation these efforts are likely to be resumed.

For the present leadership meritocracy is the ideal. For the soft left it is emphatically not.

On the second aspect of collectivism, early signs suggest a cautious revival of New Labour-style sector ‘reform’ i.e. marketisation and outsourcing. These processes were taken much further under the Coalition and Conservative governments 2010-2024 but Starmer’s initial pledge to ‘insource’ services, that is return them to the public sector, seems to have been abandoned. In opposition Wes Streeting, now Health Secretary, boasted that a Starmer government would ‘go further than New Labour ever did’ in the use of the private sector for NHS patients; and in the first year of the Starmer government 1.4 million people received private care paid for by the NHS⁴³. For Streeting this was simply a matter of making a pragmatic judgment: cutting waiting lists by utilising spare private sector capacity⁴⁴. In fact, as Jeremy Hunt observed in 2023, ‘independent hospitals employ NHS doctors for much of their work. Over-reliance on the private sector therefore sucks doctors and nurses out of NHS hospitals, making waiting lists even longer⁴⁵. At the same time the Starmer government

is in the process of disinterring the Private Finance Initiative, so discredited that it was terminated by the Tories in 2018 and, despite the solid evidence that PFI schemes are extraordinarily expensive, have not raised standards and have saddled both the health and education sectors with enormous debts.

Other signs are also discouraging. Under both Labour and Conservative governments, an ever-larger slice of social care both for children and for the elderly has been privatised, with many homes now run by private equity companies and hedge funds charging extortionate rates; profit-maximisation is now entrenched in the system of care delivery. The thorny issue of social care for the elderly has been kicked into the long grass by the government by commissioning yet another of an ever-longer list of reports; policy on private childcare homes is as yet unclear. One area the government has pushed back on, slightly, has been education, with reforms to curtail some of the freedoms and powers of academies. However in general there are few systematic signs that the Starmer government is willing to confront vested interests, replace the profit motive by the spirit of public service and guarantee a decent standard of care for both the elderly and children in need.

The third soft left principle is pluralism. We already alluded to soft left proposals for a more decentralised and participatory pattern of governance, as well as PR. Here there are some positive but small signs, for example with the enactment of the government's Representation of the People Bill. This will lower the voting age to 16, make voting easier, simplify voter registration and take some, though quite inadequate, steps to restrict the flow of private money into campaigning. However, it has completely dodged the issue of reform to the electoral system.

More generally the picture is a contradictory one. On the one hand the government has evinced some interest in schemes which will transfer responsibilities to sub-national tiers of government but, on the other, seems reluctant to delegate more fiscal powers to local and regional authorities. Overall, the Starmer government and his leadership of the party seems to have a problematic relationship to democracy both structurally and culturally. The overriding sentiment is one of control both externally and internally. The hyperfactionalism of internal order and the exclusion of alternative left voices within the party is mirrored by its abiding tribalism externally, especially towards the Greens. In the absence of a sufficient values and vision-based programme to defeat Reform, its electoral strategy relies on a lesser of two evils tactic, copied from Emmanuel Macron in France. This approach is very unlikely to work electorally, as many voters no longer see Labour as any kind of progressive alternative, and have been prepared to vote for alternative parties as they did in Caerphilly for Plaid Cymru in late 2025 or for the Greens as seen in Gorton and Denton in February 2026. The strategy is doomed in the medium-to-long-term as it simply accepts rather than makes a concerted effort to contest the shift on the balance of opinion to the right populists.

Values, to have a real impact, must be part of a larger vision, as Mrs Thatcher well understood when she stated: 'Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul'. As we are often told, Starmer has little interest in and, indeed, is impatient with talk of 'vision'. He prefers to concentrate, he insists, on practical, technocratic solutions to discrete problems. Here he is being wholly logical. A vision of a differently ordered society is only relevant to the degree one regards the established economic and social order as in some fundamental way morally flawed. The present Labour leadership certainly recognises many defects and failures, such as bars to upward social mobility, large pools of poverty and deprivation and inadequate economic growth. But it doesn't regard the socio-economic system *per se* as defective, nor does it really question or challenge the values, norms and preconceptions that underpin it.

This is a major source of difference with the soft left. A century ago, the ethical socialist RH Tawney denounced what he called the 'acquisitive society'. It was arranged not only because of the hugely unfair way in which it distributed resources but because of the values it implanted and applauded. 'Social

institutions', he held, 'are the visible expression of the scale of moral values which rule the minds of individuals'⁴⁶. And the values of the 'acquisitive society' were pernicious. 'By fixing men's minds, not upon the discharge of social obligations ... [but] upon the exercise of the right to pursue their own self-interest, it offers unlimited scope for the acquisition of riches and therefore gives free play to one of the most powerful of human instincts'⁴⁷. Civilization, he wrote in 1949, was 'a matter, not of quantity of possessions, but of quality of life'⁴⁸.

A vision of a differently ordered society is only relevant to the degree one regards the established economic and social order as in some fundamental way morally flawed. The present Labour leadership... doesn't regard the socio-economic system *per se* as defective

This post-material theme has been revived and revitalised by the soft left. New Labour, in contrast, espoused with some alacrity what Meacher called 'unabashed consumer materialism' where the market was treated 'as the measure of all things'⁴⁹. Jon Cruddas cited Labour's Head of Election Strategy who, when asked in 2005 what Labour stood for, responded: 'What we want is for more people to be able to earn and own. That is what people want. It is what Labour policy in the end is all about'⁵⁰. The soft left, inheriting Tawney's mantle, has in contrast rejected the doctrine of possessive individualism which extols the avid pursuit of self-interest, competitive conspicuous consumption and lack of concern for community wellbeing. Its vision is of a society is one that recognises that people are best served by habits of co-operation,

that embodies the ethos of public service and that elevates collective welfare over the pursuit of private advantage. It is a vision that places its accent on the importance of fostering solidarity, fellowship and care for others, ideals which used to constitute the political atmosphere in which Labour breathed⁵¹.

These considerations may at first glance appear abstract but have profound practical implications. In 1994, Labour's Social Justice Commission, set up by John Smith, emphasised the principle that 'taxes are the contribution that we all make towards building a better society. Taxation in a democratic society is based upon consent; it is a desirable good, not a necessary evil'. Instead, fearful of a backlash from the voters, annoying the right-wing press and provoking the wrath of the wealthy, under Starmer's leadership the case for higher taxation has largely gone by default. Indeed, Wes Streeting recently intimated that he thought taxation was too high and ideally should be reduced. As he has stated, 'no hope is better than false hope'. Insofar as tax rises have become inescapable to rescue public services, the Starmer government has seemed apologetic.

Taxation is the means by which the Good Society can be created. It may be an unpopular message and, of course, higher economic growth by generating more tax revenue would be immensely helpful, but someone still has to pay. This involves making the case for collective or public goods, such as clear air and water, recreation facilities, care for the disabled, damaged and disadvantaged, universal access to a good standard of healthcare and education: all of which will help restore and repair the ties that bind the country together. It means explaining that 'taxation is the price paid for a civilised life', that money foregone from private consumption could be used for more generous public purposes such as decent adult social care for all, and that all benefit from collection protection against the vicissitudes of life. And this in turn requires persuading as many people as possible 'to look beyond simple and basic calculations of self-interest, and to consider how their own good and welfare, in general terms if not specific ones, are bound up with the good of society as a whole'⁵³. Much more can be done to flesh out this alternative vision but in its absence all we are left with is a 'pale, hollow technocratic project'⁵⁴.

Conclusion

This pamphlet has sought to establish the existence and importance of a distinct soft left current separate from both the hard left and the right with its own ideological profile defined by the principles of equality, collectivism and pluralism. It envisages a socialised variant of capitalism in which the state plays a more proactive and energetic role in both stimulating the economy and promoting the common good. It sees the importance of working closely with business but challenges the excessively powerful role it now plays in the determination of many government policies. It adopts a posture of 'radical pragmatism', accepting that the party's reforming zeal must be tempered by economic and electoral realities but should never be relinquished. It recognises the need for a 'revived sense of ideological direction, a belief in a more profound cause wider and deeper than self and personal enrichment, and a reconnection of political purpose with an encompassing and fulfilling vision'⁵⁵.

The soft left is fully aware that the Labour government faces multiple challenges: a stagnant economy, obsolescent public services, an electorate which has lost faith in established political parties and politicians, with many being seduced by the often-toxic slogans peddled by Reform. It acknowledges the progress the government has already made in alleviating poverty and distress, in renewing to some extent exhausted public services, in boosting output from renewable energy sources and most notably of all in strengthening collective and individual rights at work. But it fears that its efforts are being stymied by the modesty of its critique of the established order, its fear of affronting the powerful and the wealthy, and by the absence of an overarching narrative and a vision that has equality, collectivism and pluralism at its heart.

With the upsurge in support for the Greens under the energetic leadership of Zack Polanski, the persistence of the SNP in Scotland and the rise of Plaid Cymru in Wales, Labour can no longer claim to be the only viable instrument of social change. Indeed, a defining characteristic of the soft left is the belief that no party, certainly no group within a party, holds a monopoly of wisdom. This Democratic Left calls for a progressive alliance which extends beyond any formal or informal electoral arrangements but takes the form of 'an alliance of minds, cultures, values and thinking based on trust and mutual recognition' and underpinned by a spirit of toleration⁵⁶.

With the marginalisation of the hard left, now divided between remnants in Labour and Your Party, and the abject failure of Starmer's odd concoction of Blairism pickled with the old Labour right, now would be a good time to look at the realignment of the left in Labour more generally. Labels are easily won but much harder to shake off. The term soft left only makes sense to differentiate itself from a hard left and meaningful differences have lessened somewhat. A new Democratic Left, committed to shifting wealth, ownership and democracy from the few to the many is the only space in the party offering an alternative to

the present timid, dull and drifting leadership.

However, this Democratic Left has yet to fully develop a clear and coherent programme, with detailed, thoroughly-researched and imaginative policies that can give effect to its values and vision. There are encouraging signs. With its commitment to a pluralist politics, it recognises the importance of tapping into the expertise and insights of a wide arrange of bodies such as the Resolution Foundation, the Institute of Public Policy Research, UCL Policy Lab, Renewal, the New Economic Foundation, Common Wealth, Autonomy, the Tribune Group, Compass, Mainstream and more. This, combined with both more energetic leadership from soft left figures such as Angela Rayner, Louise Haigh, Ed Miliband, younger figures such as Miatta Fahnbulleh, and especially Andy Burnham, as well as the seeming failure of the Blairites and right wing of the party to have any kind of relevant agenda for change, offers this new left the opportunity to impress a new agenda for Labour. But much more work has to be done, especially on matters of economic policy.

One thing is clear: the Starmer government is heading for the rapids, with a real possibility that at the next election Labour may lose hundreds of seats and the nightmare of a Reform government led by Nigel Farage may materialise. Something has to change. The present Labour leadership may like to reflect on Bryan Gould's observation: 'If there is one incontrovertible lesson to be learned, it is that a left politics that is disconnected from principle and analysis will lead to failure and defeat'⁵⁷.

Notes

- 1 In what follows 'New Labour' and 'the party right' are all used as synonyms.
- 2 Two years later Gould returned to his native New Zealand, a major loss to the soft left.
- 3 The soft left suffered a second major loss with Cook's premature death in 2005, thus depriving it of its two most capable leaders.
- 4 <https://www.clpd.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Keir-Starmers-10-Pledges.pdf>
- 5 <https://labourlist.org/2026/02/cabinet-league-table-february-2026/>
- 6 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpd8d10n9x5o>
- 7 Denham 2024: 27
- 8 Miliband 2014; He was heavily influenced by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's acclaimed 2010 study, *The Spirit Level* that chronicled the corrosive effects of vast disparities in income and wealth upon the quality of people's lives. Wilkinson, Richard and Pickett, Kate, *The Spirit Level*, London: Penguin, 2010.
- 9 Wood 2012
- 10 Miliband 2012
- 11 Marquand 2004: 27
- 12 As the one-time minister John Denham put it: "All across Whitehall, any policy option has now to be dressed up as 'choice', 'diversity' and 'contestability'. These are the hallmarks of the 'new model public service'." (Denham, 2006)
- 13 Gould 2013: 93
- 14 Wright 2006, Kindle ed.
- 15 Meacher 2006: 11-12
- 16 Hain 2015: 127
- 17 Along with R H Tawney and Tony Crosland Cole was one of Labour's leading theorists.
- 18 Wright 1979, Kindle ed.
- 19 Goss 2023: 15
- 20 Lawson 2019: 20
- 21 Burnham 2026
- 22 Goss 2023: 15
- 23 Goss 2023: 10
- 24 Goss 2023: 7
- 25 An important influence was a book written by a member of the LCC, Geoff Hodgson, *The Democratic Economy: A New Look at Planning, Markets and Power*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984.
- 26 Tribune, 4 December 1987
- 27 Gould 2009: 135
- 28 Gould 2010: 65
- 29 Inman 2009
- 30 Thompson 2016: 49
- 31 Hain 2015: 61
- 32 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2025/09/exclusive-andy->

[burnhams-plan-for-britain](#)

- 33 Denham 2024: 24
- 34 Thompson, Pitts and Ingold, 2021: 33
- 35 Lawson 2024
- 36 Hall 1982: 65
- 37 Hall, Massey and Rustin, 2013: 17
- 38 Lawson, 2021: 7
- 39 Compass 2025: 14
- 40 Byrne 2024, Kindle ed.
- 41 Johnson 2023: 57
- 42 Hickman 2009; Lister 2006
- 43 Donnelly 2025
- 44 Streeting 2025
- 45 Quoted in Private Eye, 5 May 2023
- 46 Tawney 1961 (1921): 10
- 47 Ibid: 32
- 48 Tawney 1966: 174
- 49 Meacher 2013: 56
- 50 Cruddas 2013
- 51 Cruddas 2009; Lawson 2009: 108
- 52 Whiting 2004: 2
- 53 Arblaster 1996: 12
- 54 Cruddas, 2024: 19
- 55 Meacher 2013: 61
- 56 Lawson 2021: 9
- 57 Gould 2009: 129

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