

## Principles not platitudes: 13 months from an election, ...

Published: January 14, 2026, 4:53 pm

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*It would seem that I am not the only person who is concerned about the Compass led letter to the Guardian from left wing think tanks on Labour's policy direction. My friend and occasional co-author shared that concern and sent me the following comment which I offer here as a guest post.*

Yesterday the left-of-centre umbrella group Compass, whom I have supported and worked with for several years, made the front page of the Guardian with a letter signed by an impressive collection of over 20 thinktanks from across the political spectrum, ranging from CLASS on the left to Progress on the centre-right, calling for the Labour party not to run a 'safety-first' 2015 election campaign but instead to adopt a set of new principles aimed at producing a "transformative change in direction".

I share the frustrations of the signatories to this letter. The current Labour policy platform appears to comprise little more than a decision to support most of the reactionary, pernicious and objectionable policies from the ConDem coalition for fear of upsetting far-right media barons. It is difficult to imagine any opposition party winning office in this manner. Why would the public elect an ersatz Tory government under Ed Miliband when David Cameron - propped up securely by Liberal Democrat collaborators - is so good at being the real thing? One of the main problems for Labour is that with little more than 12 months to go before the election, Jon Cruddas's policy review has still yet to produce firm recommendations; with the result that the Shadow Cabinet has little of substance to say other than that it supports George Osborne's spending cuts, the welfare cap, Help to Buy and many other ConDem monstrosities. At the same time Ed Miliband tours the country as a messianic figure, making admirably high-minded speeches on the need to reduce inequality and transform capitalism while failing to support any policies which might deliver on these fine aspirations.

Against this uninspiring backdrop, it is understandable that many think-tankers feel Labour has lost its way. But an alternative approach needs to be based on principles - not soundbites or platitudes. And it needs to offer a clear economic and political alternative to ConDem policies. Sadly the thinktank letter to the Guardian fails on both these counts.

The letter starts well enough: the first paragraph gets most of the challenges right. The financial system still threatens to bring the entire economic system crashing down. Austerity has been a disaster and is wrecking families' lives across most of the income distribution, but especially for the least well off. Climate change is rapidly heading completely out of control; and the democratic process bypasses huge swathes of the country, with the result being an utter contempt for all mainstream politicians. I'd add a terrifying erosion of civil liberties by the police and the intelligence services to that list but basically most of the diagnosis is all present and correct. I'd also accept - albeit grudgingly - that with the Greens only on 3% maximum in the latest polls, only Labour has the means to deliver a progressive alternative to the ConDems in 2015.

But after that things fall apart. Five principles are advanced: (1) accountability of institutions to stakeholders; (2) devolution of state institutions; (3) "prevention of the causes of our social, environmental and mental health problems"; (4) co-production of public services; (5) "empowerment of everybody". None of these are wrong in themselves, although some certainly raise question marks for the left, as they are entirely compatible with aspects of what the ConDem government is doing. To use an example from the social security system, the replacement of national rules for Council Tax Benefit and the social fund loan system with a patchwork collection of rules set by local councils is both inefficient (as the system has to be designed 400 times rather than once), unfair (as clear entitlements have been replaced with a postcode lottery) and regressive (many local authorities have cut back severely on the funding available for working age families in particular). What this shows is that "devolution of state institutions" is not, in itself, a particularly left-wing or progressive idea. It is possible to devise devolving policies which do deliver on these objectives but the devil is in the detail.

Co-production is another area which can be pursued for left-wing or right-wing ends, largely depending on the overall level of resources being made available to public service users. In social care, for example, the language of co-production is currently being used by cash-strapped local authorities to provide a linguistic shield for swingeing cuts in eligibility which leave many vulnerable people to fend for themselves). Accountability of institutions is obviously a necessary condition for a progressive future

but not a sufficient condition. After all, the Co-op was formally accountable to its members, but in practice, whatever the organisational statutes promised, the reality was an organisation mimicking the worst excesses of the plc banking boom, with a chairman out of his brain on crystal meth. Delivering on “empowerment” - in the shape of true economic and political democracy - would ensure accountability if done properly, and is one of only two principles that mark this out as a specifically left-of-centre statement. The other is “prevention of the causes of our social, environmental and mental health problems”, which - when one thinks about it for a moment - is basically a thinly coded (and welcome) call for the end of capitalism as we know it.

So, in my view only two of the principles suggested in the letter offer an unambiguously left-of-centre perspective; the other three could form part of a coherent left programme if fleshed out, but by themselves they do nothing to mark this agenda out as anything other than business as usual. However, the biggest failing of the letter isn't to do with what's in it, but rather what's not in it. There is a gaping economy-sized hole in this statement; and even though the UK economy is considerably diminished since 2008, the hole is still a very big one! One has to ask the obvious question: given that ConDem austerity has been an unmitigated disaster, shouldn't one of the key principles of this kind of statement - perhaps the fundamental principle - be that austerity needs to be ended, as in, NOW?

As it happens, the organisation that compiled the signatures for this letter - Compass - produced a very coherent alternative to austerity a couple of years back. It was called Plan B, and its basic policy recommendation was a flat-out rejection of ConDem austerity economics, instead substituting a programme of reversing most of the cuts in public expenditure since 2010, and massively increased public investment in infrastructure and renewable energy - funded in the short run by green quantitative easing, and in the longer run by a substantial increase in the tax burden on the wealthy and the super-rich (by means of, among other measures, a. financial transactions tax, land value tax, and a General Anti-Avoidance Bill along the lines of the version drafted by Richard which Michael Meacher has tried to introduce). Plan B was a clear and principled vision which involved the clear rejection of neoliberalism and austerity in favour of building a completely different kind of economy. For sure, it was only a starting point, and many of the policy prescriptions within it needed a lot of fleshing out, but it could have - indeed, should have - formed the basis of a truly radical Labour policy review.

Whereas instead, the policy prescriptions of Plan B have been totally ignored by the

Labour leadership, in favour of (it seems) meekly signing up to George Osborne's economic agenda. Given the total failure of Labour to mount a convincing challenge to "ConDemnomics", this thinktank statement of principles - although undoubtedly well-intentioned - seems to me a depressingly retrograde step. An election is only thirteen months away, and if Ed Miliband is to achieve anything at all in government rather than being a British version of Francois Hollande - marking time for five years before being turfed out in a right-wing landslide - it will be necessary to spend the next six to nine months translating Ed Miliband's admirably high-minded speeches into a radical policy agenda. Achieving that would be worth a lot more than abstract principles and statements of purpose, but given that abstract principles seem to be dish of the day at the moment, let me finish by offering my own five-point list, which does have some overlap with the think-tank letter but offers much clearer dividing lines. It would be impossible to imagine the five points below emanating from the Conservatives, or indeed the Liberal Democrats.

- (1) Austerity has failed and must be completely and permanently abandoned. The next Labour government needs to preside over a significant increase in public expenditure (which should be targeted at the least well-off households) and taxation (which should be targeted at the most well-off households).
- (2) The current neoliberal institutional apparatus, the rampant growth of finance capital, and the stranglehold of multinational corporate power are a fundamental threat to our well-being. UK Government institutions - and transnational institutions such as the EU - need to be reformed and where necessary strengthened so that they are sufficiently powerful to take on and roll back these neoliberal forces.
- (3) Subject to the achievement of point (2), power should be devolved in government and across public, private and voluntary sector institutions to move us towards full economic and political democracy in as many areas as possible.
- (4) The economy needs to be re-orientated - at a local, national and global level - so as to address the cause of our present environmental, economic and social problems. In some ways this will mean the end of the current capitalist system as we know it.
- (5) Fundamental reforms to the balance between state and citizen - safeguarding freedom of speech and assembly, and the right to privacy - are needed to address the UK's severe civil liberty deficit.

I remain committed to working with Compass, CLASS, the Fabian Society and many of the other thinktanks on this list to make these principles a reality.

*I would add I share Howard's final sentiment, as well as his other concerns.*