

## **Class Anger and Class Consciousness**

“They don’t care about us.”

“A building like this wouldn’t fly in a rich area, but because everyone that lives here are poor and working class that’s why it’s happened.”

**THE FIRE IN THE TOWER BLOCK** in West London has brought things to a head. If Teresa May wasn’t dead in the water before it, she is now. A visceral hatred of the Conservatives is taking hold over large swathes of the population, as the horror of the conflagration – of a mother throwing her four-year-old out of a fifth floor window before being engulfed in the flames – seeps into wider public consciousness. This catastrophic accident is coming to symbolise what’s wrong with how we are ruled.

On the other hand Tory politicians genuinely believe that guarding the welfare of “the investing public” is the key to general prosperity. Their prior commitment to protecting the interests of the capitalist class is, they believe, the cornerstone of the safety and security of all of us, both rich and poor. This is why they are so often caught out disregarding the concerns and worries of working class people who they think of as recipients of the generosity of higher rate taxpayers rather than as the principal source of society’s wealth.

They are not alone in holding this opinion; very large numbers of working people share this outlook too, taking the view that if we’re to live in a capitalist society, what could be better than to have capitalists running things? This ideology is helped along with notions like the “big society”, and “one nation conservatism”. “We’re all in this together”, and similar

slogans, are deployed to camouflage disconcerting inequalities in order to shore up the idea that the wealthy oligarchy that runs most things, knows best.

Consequently, more than half of the electorate in the General Election voted Tory despite years of austerity, a ludicrously bad manifesto, and Teresa May's inability to identify with the experience and concerns of millions of folk faced with frozen wages, rising prices, and the apparent impossibility of ever being able to get ahead.

This has to be set against the substantial minority of the population who've been enthused by Jeremy Corbyn's leadership and by Labour's recent left turn. The Labour Party lost the election, but the disarray and sheer incompetence of Teresa May's leadership has strengthened the belief in Labour ranks that one more heave will put Corbyn and McDonnell in Downing Street.

It may be so.

But the rising levels of hatred and division, accompanied as they are by unbridled enthusiasm for St Jeremy, are seriously undermining the critical faculties of many people. Any criticism of Corbyn, any scepticism regarding Labour's programme, provokes immediate hostility, unbridled insults, insinuations of disloyalty, or even accusations of outright support for "the class enemy".

However, raw hatred of the rich, and calling the Tories "murderers" or "scum", does not amount to class-consciousness. As a result there is a spirit abroad, which seeks to silence or shut down any critical discussion of the Labour Party, of its record, or of its actual potential and possibilities.

This reaction is intensified by the manner in which the current Labour leadership has couched discussion of its policies in relation to social justice and inequality. The promotion of social justice and the reduction of inequality, while seeming inherently anti-capitalist, actually dampen down any fundamental engagement with criticism of current social relations. By suggesting that taxation can be used to address inequality, and

that improved welfare and educational provision can redress injustice, Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, are employing long-established social democratic nostrums, which evoke hope and vast enthusiasm for a programme that in practice can deliver neither equality or social justice.

The manifest unfairness produced by the private ownership of socially produced wealth, by the private ownership of investment portfolios, and businesses of all kinds, cannot be ameliorated to any serious degree by the fiscal measures advocated by the Labour programme. Quite apart from the relative modesty of John McDonnell's proposals, there is no way that the capitalist class would cooperate. This is because you can be sure that company lawyers are already hard at work determining ways and means to limiting the impact of increases in corporation tax, just as the 'tax efficiency' accountants and advisers will ensure that increases in personal taxes paid by the rich are side-stepped with alacrity.

Consequently, Labour's estimation of how much they'd be able to collect from the well to do by fiscal means is highly optimistic to say the least. Of course, the government could raise large amounts of money by issuing bonds and other debt instruments, which at current low interest rates Labour could use to stimulate economic activity thus helping the economy to grow. So, there is little doubt that with a fair wind and a lot of luck some improvement could be brought about by a Corbyn led government, however, it would fall very far short of "shifting the balance of wealth and power" to "the many not the few."

This is because inequality and unfairness are endemic in this society – they are part of its DNA. Without developing an anti-capitalist programme in which ways could be found to extend democracy from the sphere of political regulation to the direct management of economic life no significant or fundamental change can be achieved.

The Labour Party and Momentum's enthusiasts by attempting to short-circuit the political process of

developing a broad class-consciousness and an anti-capitalist movement are colluding, instead, with the Labour tradition of running British capitalism in the interests of the working class. Although, this is an intrinsically contradictory enterprise there is no doubt that in the future, just as in the past, such an approach *might* be able to effect some improvements in social welfare, housing, and education. Given the globalised nature of capital and of rapid international financial flows, “Might” is the operative word here. To be sure Labour’s modest offer, with or without a state investment bank, will not alter the balance of wealth and power in any significant manner.

Similarly, the nationalisation of railways and other utilities will not automatically create better services – no doubt trade union officials, and collective bargaining, would be strengthened, but we can have no reason for assuming that the kind of ordinary ‘public ownership’ practiced in Britain in the past, or in capitalist countries throughout the world today would result in better or more efficient services.

Despite Labour’s campaign rhetoric social justice, and equality for the many, not the few, are simply not on offer.

Therefore it seems to me that a demand should be raised everywhere that the surviving households of the Grenfell Tower fire should immediately be granted permanent tenancies at their previous rents in vacant properties requisitioned (or compulsorily purchased) by the government overnight. Only demands of this order have the potential of turning class anger into the consciousness that it is the property relations which lie at the root of our problems and not the hopes, threats, corruption, or promise, of this or that politician or party.