

Books

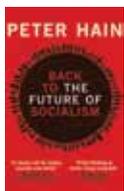
Reviews



Back to the Future of Socialism

by Peter Hain

Policy Press, 348pp, £19.99



One of the cruellest post-election dilemmas for the Labour Party is that, to win in 2020, it will have to be more left-wing and more right-wing at the same time. There is a depressing feeling that none of the solutions offered by the leadership contenders – a return to Blairism (Kendall), Bennite socialism (Corbyn) or simply more competence (Burnham and Cooper) – will work. Labour needs to win back poor voters who think it won't do enough, and prosperous voters who fear it will do too much and wreck things. The next leader's biggest battle will be to convince voters that Labour hasn't just run out of road.

Peter Hain's *Back to the Future of Socialism*, written before May's election, harks back to Tony Crosland's influential 1956 tome, *The Future of*

Socialism. In forging a Keynesian synthesis between socialism and market capitalism - through full employment, a generous welfare state and social egalitarianism - Crosland provided the intellectual foundations for all Labour governments from Harold Wilson's to Gordon Brown's (Crosland is probably best remembered now for his expletive-laden promise to get rid of every grammar school in England).

But with new technologies and the globalisation of trade and finance, "the future for socialism requires a new synthesis," writes Hain. His ideas are very similar to those set out by Will Hutton twenty years ago in *The State We're In* and developed more recently by the Italian-American academic Mariana Mazzucato: the idea of an "enabling" or "entrepreneurial" state, actively intervening to develop new industries and boost productivity,

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while directly investing in skills and infrastructure.

"There is no future for Britain trying to compete at the shoddy end of the quality spectrum, charging rock-bottom prices for copycat products made using clapped-out kit by unskilled labour on poor pay," writes Hain.

A Cabinet Minister in successive New Labour governments, Hain candidly admits that New Labour was slowly digging its own grave. "An absolute priority was given to winning the 'middle' on the assumption that the 'core' have nowhere else to go," he says. "This was a mistake, because actually, it did go elsewhere – either to another party or to stay at home."

As a purely electoral strategy, New Labour offered no answer to the question of how to reconcile global market capitalism with social democracy. Having abandoned Crosland, it had nothing to put in his place.

The big question is whether Hain's ideas are big enough, new enough or electorally appealing enough to fill that space. Much of his programme looks similar to the one just rejected by voters, while his focus on Labour as the only progressive political force in Britain looks out of place in an era of fickle voters and multi-party politics.

It's a stretch to accommodate ideas that will appeal to Croslandites, Blairites, Greens, "red 'Kippers'" and what I suppose we must now call Corbynite socialists. The British left not only differs on how to secure economic growth and what kind of growth to go for, but on the need for economic growth at all.

Just as New Labour had no political philosophy to replace Crosland's, Hain lacks an electoral strategy capable of beating the most powerful alliance of right-wing forces in the democratic era. Unless the British left can unite around some sense of common purpose, the future of socialism looks black indeed.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan