

Blue Labour and its paradoxical peer

Maurice Glasman is setting out a long-term agenda for pursuing the common good. In it are lessons for both the Right as well as the Left

BY JAMES MUMFORD

In 2013 Lord Glasman of Stoke Newington and Stamford Hill was giving a lecture at the Vatican. He was expecting to speak to a handful of intellectuals. Hundreds of people turned up, including, in the third row, a man wearing a white skullcap with a broad smile on his face. Speaking in Italian, Glasman outlined his signature critique of our overweening states and exploitative markets. He found himself assailed by an American free-market fundamentalist. “Interfering in managerial prerogatives and the free movement of capital,” said his interlocutor, “there’s a word for this—Communism.” Glasman, who hails from a small-business background and whose project revolves around broader access to credit and the wider distribution of profit, set about defending himself. A fierce debate ensued until the man in the third row stood up to intervene. The room fell silent. “What’s the idea?” said Pope Francis to the American, siding with Glasman. “You exploit the parents and then buy pencils for their children in school?”

The ruckus in Rome is a characteristic example of the kind of surprising encounters Glasman has had since his remarkably rapid political rise. “The Pope gave me a medal for my services to Catholic Social Teaching,” Glasman divulged, “which was, for a Jewish boy from Palmer’s Green, unexpected.”

It’s also an example of the kind of waves he has been making since 2010. Five years ago Glasman was an obscure academic at London Metropolitan University. By day he taught political philosophy. By night he worked as a community organiser, gathering and galvanising the poorest immigrant communities in East London (some of which he saw represented in his classroom) to take action against the injustices they suffered. Employers, typically big international corporations, not paying a living wage was one central issue. So too were establishing City Safe Havens in stores for teenagers and others who felt vulnerable (such as being followed), and exposing payday lenders.

Then, suddenly, a fortuitous set of circumstances propelled Glasman into the political limelight. In the last few days of the 2010 general election campaign, London Citizens, an umbrella institution for community organising, had managed to get Nick Clegg, David Cameron and Brown to agree, at the last moment, to a fourth debate, in addition to their TV encounters. It took place in Methodist Central Hall, Westminster. Each leader was asked how he would respond to the pressing social issues surfacing from the streets. Somehow Glasman found himself writing a speech for Gordon Brown, of whom he was no great supporter. But through Ed Miliband he managed to

get the speech to the Prime Minister, and Brown ran with it. The text was refreshing, allowing Brown to demonstrate a humanity and passion that had, up to that

point, been missing from his campaign and, some might say, premiership. Maurice mined the missing emotion and found the forgotten story for Brown. The speech quickly became the biggest success in the history of the British political internet. “200,000 visits in three hours,” Glasman recalls. “I’d written a hit.”

The next surprise followed soon after. Although Glasman had supported neither Miliband in the Labour leadership election after Brown’s resignation, the victorious Ed made him a peer. But having gone to such lengths to honour the scruffy academic who’d somehow struck a chord, Miliband then left him to his own devices. Glasman had hoped—not presumptuously, given his ennoblement—to be invited into the new leader’s inner circle to be “a strategy guy”. He says this with no trace of self-pity, but a little ruefully, rather as when he divulges that his football career was cut short because he was a Jew and Hackney Under 11s played on the Sabbath: “I made the team but not the game”.

Amid a series of unfortunate Ed’s-guru-garrottes-Ed interventions in the press (Miliband has “flickered rather than shone, nudged not led”, he declared in 2012) Glasman developed his own distinctive group or movement within the Labour party. As a riposte to Phillip Blond’s “Red Toryism”, he pioneered a trenchant double critique of both market and state which he termed “Blue Labour”. Blue because it aspired to speak to conservative values—faith, flag and family—and because it sought to formulate an agenda which could win back the six million blue-collar workers Labour had lost between 1997 and 2010. It is a political proposition which, depending on your point of view, is invigorating, annoying, challenging or naive—but unquestionably innovative.

But then Glasman is used to breaking new ground. The son of a Jewish toymaker in Limehouse, East London, and grandson of immigrants fleeing early-20th-century pogroms in Eastern Europe, he went to the comprehensive Jews’ Free School (JFS), which was then in Camden Town, North London, and became the first person in his family to go to Oxbridge (St Catherine’s College, Cambridge, 1979-1982). He was always willing to embrace new challenges: he played in a hot university band and after graduating secured a music deal before suddenly realising that it wasn’t his vocation. So he sold his instruments and started reading books again, going to York for an MA in political theory, then saw a poster advertising PhDs at the University of Florence and headed to Italy despite speaking not a word of Italian.

Blue Labour has a second dimension to it. It is about building a new political consensus around the common good ▶

‘By day he taught political philosophy. By night he worked as a community organiser’



Determined to break new ground: Maurice Glasman speaks at an Occupy event in 2012

as much as it is about reimagining the Labour party. Forging a new kind of politics will require the engagement of many actors, the interaction of many traditions; the collaboration of many works. It is the work of many hands. “The reconciliation of estranged interests,” Glasman writes, “is fundamental to a good society . . . and it is the work of no one institution alone.” Reforming institutions so that they offer incentives to virtue and not to vice is more than one political party can accomplish.

Two tasks, then: a party to change; a politics to renew. Glasman is fond of saying that it’s best to ask Marvin Gaye’s question of what’s going on before moving to Lenin’s question of what is to be done. “And what’s going on,” he writes in the first programmatic essay of *Blue Labour: Forging a New Politics* (edited by Ian Geary and Adrian Pabst, I.B. Tauris, £14.99), “is that society is disintegrating in the face of the state and the market which are characterised by centralisation, concentration and commodification.”

Both Left and Right have failed to diagnose exactly those features of this predicament which their respective traditions should have predisposed them to see. So, conservatives since Burke “have been unable to comprehend that the market centralises power”, while Labour has shown itself “unable to understand how the state can undermine responsibility, agency and participation”. So far, so symmetrical.

Not only has the diagnosis been woeful, but the policies pursued when Left and Right have been in power have only accentuated our systemic problems. Glasman has described Blue Labour as “a completely agitational idea to provoke a conversation

about what went wrong with the Blair project”. One thing that went wrong with New Labour was the public-private partnerships that crushed civic institutions and built an economy upon debt (between 1997 and 2007 84 per cent of the £1.3 trillion lent by banks was in mortgages and financial services). Conversely, the Big Society programme the Coalition offered as a remedy to the dominance of state and market failed to take already existing civic institutions seriously. It also put all the eggs in the volunteering basket, and, as Glasman puts it somewhat caustically, “It is hard to engage in public life if you have to work two jobs because you are not paid enough to live.” Strengthening society has to go hand in hand with tackling market inequalities.

The diagnosis, then, is far-reaching. But what about solutions? If the diagnosis of our situation is profound, Glasman is well aware that, as Sibelius put it, “They never built a statue in honour of a critic.” The constructive alternative shaped by Blue Labour is multi-faceted. It begins with a provision for the poorest of a ceiling and a floor. The ceiling, an interest rate cap of 20 per cent, is vital to prevent usurers preying on the vulnerability of the destitute. The floor is a living wage, a realistic income for workers bearing the brunt of globalisation and immigration. Ensuring that work pays is also fundamental for the family to flourish: breadwinners must have time to see their dependents, as well as provide for them.

A focus on institutions is what prevents a Blue Labour agenda being overly individualistic. Britain is sorely in need of the

rehabilitation of its great ancient institutions, like vocational guilds. It also needs new decentralised institutions, particularly in areas neglected by Westminster for too long. Credit unions and local banks (without which any interest rate

cap is a hamstrung proposal) are good examples of this. “A good society is a human-scale and humane society, where people can participate in having some power over their lives through working with others,” says Glasman. Belonging to your own little platoon is where that agency begins. Reforms must be set in regions and places all too often neglected by Westminster. “We care about people from faraway towns,” as Glasman puts it.

Above all, in terms of a constructive programme, a restructuring of the economy is pivotal to addressing the inequality of power in the market. The workforce is a necessary good of any company, and as such needs to be more intimately involved in shaping its strategy and delivery. Increasing self-ownership is one way of doing that; putting workers on boards (co-determination) another, a measure the state would initiate—through, say, a Company Act—but not then proceed to manage.

Co-determination of industry, like measures against usury and guarantees of income levels, all emanate from the response to unfettered capitalism which was Catholic Social Thought. But it was through his father, Coleman Glasman, that Maurice learnt to appreciate the success of this model where it was actually realised: post-war Germany.

Coleman Glasman was a frustrated intellectual. After three years spent hunting Nazis in Austria, he was forced to take over the family toy-making business in Limehouse. But he instilled in his son a profound admiration for the post-war German economic model, which was impressive: a Jew of his generation could be forgiven for entertaining only contempt towards Hitler’s homeland. But Coleman was not afraid to believe that a genuine transformation was taking place in the country, a transformation that had something to do with Catholic Social Thought. Germany was a lesson in “the profundity of defeat”. “Because [the Germans] completely lost,” Maurice Glasman says, “they went for the opposite of where they were.” Having had a centralised economy revolving around one leader, now they opted for a decentralised, federated system. “The only two forces which emerged with any popular legitimacy—because they hadn’t been co-opted into the Nazi system—were the free and democratic trade unions and the Catholic Church.” These two institutions formed the basis of a new system which paid real attention to the status of those groups which had backed Hitler after the Great Depression: workers, small farmers and the *Mittelstand* (small business).

A different style of politics emerged. In Germany, Coleman told his son, “the workers and the bosses get around the table and negotiate. Not like in England where it’s always oppositional.” And the efficacy of the reconstructed economy defied both social-democratic and neo-liberal models. Under Thatcherite logic Germany should have been an inefficient economy in need of deregulation. Yet it seemed to be generating value. (This became the subject of Glasman’s PhD, published in 1996 as *Unnecessary Suffering: Managing Market Utopia*.) Studying in Italy but grappling with Germany, Glasman experienced an epiphany of a contrary kind. The secular socialist tradition Glasman had turned to as an act of teenage rebellion “was in a terrible way [having become] far too reliant on the state”. Thatcherism, Glasman detected, “spoke of a desire for people to be free and live their lives. We had to talk to that and I didn’t know how.” Once again he sought to see past the polarities of Left and Right.

If mining the German model was about returning to his father, articulating a distinctly “Blue Labour” agenda has been about returning to his mother. “Her death [on January 1, 2009] was a terrible experience. Blue Labour came out of that, as a love

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poem to her.” Rivie Glasman was “Labour through and through”, convinced that Conservatism had failed Britain in the 1930s. Yet she was also “a very conservative lady”, and the things she cared about—faith, flag and family—were issues on which liberal theory drew a blank. But they were concerns that animated Maurice’s students and faith communities organised by London Citizens. “Working with mosques, black churches, Catholic churches,” he says, “brought me closer to my mum and where she was. I think I had just caught up with her before she died.”

Glasman is a paradoxical figure—a lifelong academic who is also a local activist; a secular, atheist Jew who spends his time talking about the gift to the world which was Catholic Social Thought. And Blue Labour shares this paradoxical quality:

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Glasman’s readiness to express emotion is disarming; his commitment to, even enjoyment of, listening enviable. If there’s an epitaph that could summarise his activity during the last Parliament it would be “only connect”, which for him means “having difficult conversations all over the place”. (In 2011 he took this to the extreme with the English Defence League.) Encounters with real human beings will be the sine qua non of building a new politics. We will be required “to show an uncharacteristic civility to each other”, as he says.

If Glasman is a Labour peer who has been effectively ostracised by Ed Miliband, fated to spend more time in the doghouse than the Upper House, we might well ask what purchase his agenda has on the party. Is there any chance of Labour, let alone the country, running with Glasman’s sweeping vision? The book of essays published recently provides something of an answer, attesting as it does to a movement led by but not exhausted by Glasman’s personality. David Lammy MP and Frank Field MP contribute essays and identify as Blue Labour protagonists. Even more significantly, the surprise appointment of Jon Cruddas (another contributor) as head of Labour’s policy review, suggests Blue Labour has a place at the party’s high table. And the party’s election manifesto bore that out: proposing football fans on boards of clubs is a distinctively Blue Labour suggestion. Moreover, as Glasman was quick to point out three weeks before the election, while he and his collaborators campaigned hard for Labour candidates, “the election is only an episode in a longer story. Then life will continue.” This project is broad-based and intended to be long-lasting.

Perhaps the greatest promise of Blue Labour is its commitment to move beyond the kind of suffocating secular liberal discourse a generation of PPE graduates has bequeathed us. New Labour’s mantra that “we don’t do God” seems not only politically passé but radically undemocratic. It fails to represent the plethora of faith groups whose participation in public life is vital for any project to build a consensus around the common good. It is no coincidence that Rowan Williams wrote the forward to this collection. Nor is the fact that Glasman, not a believer himself, is a historian who looks back behind Fabianism to the origins of a party indissociable from Catholicism and nonconformism. Blue Labour, then, confronts a 21st century very different from how many elites imagined it, where faith had been thoroughly extirpated from the public square and was increasingly absent from the private realm. The future Glasman and his collaborators envisage is vibrant, spiritual and communal—a truly post-liberal movement. 