

A message to Jon Cruddas and Labour: challenge, construct and connect

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/message-to-jon-cruddas/

5/14/2015

The Labour Party needs to do a better job in future of challenging their opponents' narrative rather than working from within its frame, says [Mary Evans](#). From there, it would be possible and beneficial to set out new ways of thinking about politics and the political without resorting to the binaries of 'left' and 'right'. And finally, the party must connect, not just with focus groups or the powerful, but with campaigners and those with real professional experience outside the Westminster bubble.



Jon Cruddas, charged with reviewing Labour's defeat in the recent general election, is probably not short of messages at the moment. So in summary: challenge, construct and connect.

Should Cruddas care to read on, this is the thinking behind those three suggestions. First of all, please – as thousands of people were imploring the Labour Party to do from 2010 onwards – use your voice in Parliament to challenge your opponents. Thousands of words were spent on pointing out that it would be in the best interests not just of historical accuracy but also of the Labour Party to argue that over-spending by the Labour government did not create the circumstances that allowed the legitimization of austerity. The absence of any kind of coherent and sustained argument on this matter bodes very ill for the future of English politics if the opposition party simply refuses to oppose and interprets its political role as one of amendment and appeasement. Narratives are part of the fabric of politics and once the Labour Party had agreed that it had spent money with wild recklessness there was little chance of winning back the mantle of responsible citizenship.

So having said, loudly and often, that an international recession brought international consequences, the worst of which Gordon Brown prevented, there would have been a space for asking the constructive question of how the situation could best be managed for the greatest number of people and with the least damage to vulnerable individuals and the social fabric. Its called joining up the dots and is a very different exercise in political rhetoric from resorting to Churchill's bon mots which is the usual resort of the Conservative Party. 'We are all in this together' was – and is – simply laughable in the second decade of the twentieth century and should have been rejected as precisely that.

But the construction of a viable narrative is much more than simply scorn for platitudes: the UK at present includes any number of groups, individuals and associations, who are setting out positive ways to improve and enrich the quality of individual lives in ways other than tiny tax cuts or exercises in flag waving. The Green Party, individual journalists such as Zoe Williams and campaigners such as Lisa McKenzie have all set out new ways of thinking about politics and the political without resorting to the binaries of 'left' and 'right'. Words matter in politics and are especially important at a time when 'right' seems to have been glued to 'right thinking Conservatives' whilst 'change' has been seized by UKIP, to imply change back to a mythical past.

In the film [Erin Brockovich](#) there is a moment when the heroine asks for a pay rise and says 'Don't make me beg'. The very worst case scenario of the result of Conservative policies is that more people will have to beg, if not literally, then at least through subservience to various regimes of injustice and financial hardship. Perhaps the nasty party will not be quite so nasty. But more important, the Labour Party must not adopt the same position of abjection as those experiencing the worst of 'austerity'. There is no need to concede political space, to limit political debate to the agenda of the opposition or to forget that the strengths and the possibilities of the English language do not belong to any one group and neither does the capacity to answer back.

So finally, connect, and connect not with focus groups or the powerful but with two crucial groups: those people campaigning, for example, for rights to tenancy, retaining schools run by local authorities and keeping libraries,

parks and many forms of public facilities open, and second those with real professional experience from outside the little world of Westminster. It has often been remarked by people in these groups that their MP has 'never been near us' and the most that has been received is a bland letter about 'difficult decisions'.

But also connect and examine critically every modish word and idea. At present, for example, that might include the idea of 'aspiration'. So question its many implications, one of which is to suggest that if those 'aspiring' behave or have the same values or the same willingness to think only of individual gain as the candidates on The Apprentice then perhaps the word is worth re-thinking. In all, move and question the boundaries of the political space; politicians, just as much as the present Pope, could join a conversation about the idea of a 'good life'

Decades ago, Leonard Woolf emerged furious from a lunch party with Beatrice Webb, decrying that woman's enthusiasm for committees. She had, he said, 'talked incessantly and every tenth word was committee'. The sense of the dead hand of conventional politics can displace political energy to very unlovely places; connecting with the positive possibilities of that energy demands taking risks with ideas but above all allowing voices to be heard from the richly creative society in which we live.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Policy Exchange](#) CC BY 2.0

About the Author

Mary Evans is a Centennial Professor at the LSE, based at the Gender Institute. She has written on various aspects of gender and women's studies and many of those publications have crossed disciplinary lines between the social sciences and the humanities. She was a founding editor of the European Journal of Women's Studies and is presently working on a study of narratives – and continuities – of class and gender. Her latest edited book is [Gender](#) (Routledge, 2010).

