

Labour Party (Britain): Starmer's never never land

Saturday 30 July 2022, by [KELLOWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2022).

Dave Kelloway enters the Never Never Land of Starmer's Growth, Growth, Growth speech.

You just think lovely wonderful thoughts," Peter explained, "and they lift you up in the air.}

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Keir Starmer's latest vision speech - Growth, Growth, Growth - about the economy is supposed to be pragmatic, cold-headed and realistic. Ditching all that Corbynista ideology about the many, not the few will herald an electoral victory and a bright new world for us all. In fact, the Labour leaders imagine a totally ideological world that has never really existed.

In Starmerworld profit, exploitation and class conflict do not exist. Bosses will listen to Keir's sweet words and give up their crony capitalism of Covid contracts. They will come to their senses about tax dodging and the perennial race to cut labour costs through insecure contracts and universal credit subsidised wages. Bad bosses will all disappear like magic as Labour persuades them to be in a partnership in the good ship national enterprise sailing along in a dying sea of never-ending growth.

Keir's latest excuse for dumping his notorious ten 'continuity Corbyn' pledges to secure the leadership is that the pandemic now means common ownership of the utilities is no longer possible. There is no magic money tree. In the real world of course the public services performed rather efficiently during the pandemic while we saw private capital milking huge profits as the Tories' mates. Billions were frittered away on hopeless test and trace systems. Businesses across the land also diddled the taxpayer out of billions through grifting Covid loans and grants. Starmer fails to notice the massive profits all the utilities - including the rail companies - are still making. Any costs of taking them into common ownership would be rapidly recovered. As Andrew Fisher former senior advisor to Jeremy Corbyn explained:

The reason why private companies want water and rail and energy in private ownership is because they make money out of it. They're revenue-generating assets. So if you take them into public ownership, then you gain that revenue-generating asset. So it actually brings in money

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Throughout this speech and in all his previous 'vision' essays business is to be partnered as a completely neutral and unproblematic entity. There is nothing systematically exploitative about it in

the world conceived by Starmer or Reeves. They highlight a few bad attitudes and practices such as short-term profit taking over long-term investment, failure to lift skills levels and zero-hour contracts. But they think a few conversations with them and new quangos like an Industry Strategy Council will wipe away such practices.

People with short memories might think this is an innovative form of social democracy. Cutting-edge industries like aerospace and pharmaceutical are invoked as leading the solution. Exciting visits made by the leader are recounted in the speech. There is the ritual reference to his toolmaker father who could not imagine today's wonders. But all this guff about technology leading us to the promised land was paraded by Wilson in 1964 with the 'white heat of the technological revolution' or with Blair and the digital revolution. Computers in schools were going to erase the huge class inequality in educational outcomes. Business is divided up crudely between the good guys - like Nissan or Astrazeneca - and the cowboys who offshore their assets and profits. Except if you read the speech he does not even spend much time on the bad capitalists. There is a single reference to a 'new deal for workers' rights' which of course does not abolish all the Tory anti-union laws. We all have heard his strident call not to support the striking rail workers or any other strikers for that matter.

There is a total failure to see any system behind the way our economy is run, a system that links all business. At least the Corbyn slogan of **for the many not the few** implicitly accepted there might be some conflict between the needs of working people and the way the entire system works.

One of the main soundbites of the speech is the mantra, Growth, Growth Growth. It is a deliberate Starmer nod to Blair's Education, Education Education. There are two main fallacies in this profoundly ideological slogan.

First, it assumes capitalist growth automatically leads to lessened exploitation and inequality. Despite some minor changes in poverty levels inequality significantly increased in the relative growth years of the Blair government. The modifications suggested in this speech are not of the scale that would alter this dynamic. To make society fairer and more equal some people (the rich) have to be levelled down. True the exceptional circumstances of the post-war boom did for a temporary period allow wages profits and social spending to increase together as Thomas Piketty has shown in his work. Today those conditions - rebuilding after the war, strengthening trade unions and countering the Soviet Union cannot be recreated - by a few bland, vague aspirations.

The **second** main fallacy is the opposition between an unproblematically defined growth strategy and the need to reach for sustainable zero or near zero growth in the advanced economies if we are to prevent climate catastrophe. Starmer cannot ignore such an obvious problem so he argues that 'a plan for net zero needs growth and a plan for growth needs net zero'. Some special advisor must have felt pleased to come up with such a whizz solution. But if you think about it for a moment it is just another feel-good soundbite in Starmerworld. Any party serious about ecology has to have a position on whether we are for or against continued capitalist, consumer-led growth. What is not considered of course by the Labour leadership is that the very lifeblood of capital is 'forever' growth. It literally dies as a system if it cannot continue to sell and marketise everything, including the air we breathe and the water we drink.

There is an attempt to contrast this new growth perspective, allowing a 'fairer Britain' with a supposedly older Labour framework of crude growth and redistribution. Starmer's growth is based on a revolution in productivity, education and skills upgrading and some vague increased local/regional participation. To be fair to earlier Labour programmes most of this was part and parcel of the offer. Interestingly the word redistribution does not feature much or at all in this speech. Clearly, it smacks a bit too much of Corbynism.

Significant principles are solemnly laid out such as:

'strong, secure and fair growth'

and government policy that is

'fair, British, partnership with business, spreading economic power to communities and investing in productivity'

All the mainstream political parties would put their hands up for these principles. We can all still remember Johnson boosting on about AstraZeneca and how British science was leading the world. The difference between the concrete policies of the 2017 and 2019 Labour manifestos are stark.

Starmer indicates he no longer favours bringing the utilities or rail companies back into public ownership. Since the shadow chancellor's interview which was explicitly against rail nationalisation, there has been a bit of rowing back. Starmer has emphasised a good bit of rail is already public and that a Labour government would still look at some form of nationalisation. The problem is that he and Reeves are already using the weasel words of 'forms of common ownership' to water down what real public control would mean. Nevertheless taking over the other utilities is now firmly ruled out in favour of regulation.

Even within the world of social liberal governments the benefits of public ownership of the utilities and rail in the context of the cost of living crisis is obvious. Spain, France, Italy and Germany have all taken measures to somewhat alleviate the effects of this crisis. For example, energy bills have been directly cut by the government or cheap/free travel has been temporarily introduced. There is broad opposition within the labour movement to this dumping of manifesto policies supported by well over 50% of the population. Even shadow front bench spokespeople, like Louis Haigh and Sam Tarry, have repeated the pledge on rail nationalisation. The TUC has put out a strong statement on the issue backing the manifesto policy. Momentum has denounced the Starmer speech as 'neo-liberal dogma' and is mobilising members around motions on this and the green new deal at the upcoming Labour conference. The SNP and the Green Party have also strongly condemned the dropping of these policies on common ownership.

Although Starmer could - as all labour leaders often do - totally ignore conference votes - it is an important campaign for all activists. Alongside the rail workers and other strikes, this challenge to Starmer's ultra-moderate approach could be significant. As we write Sam Tarry, shadow transport spokesperson has defied the leader's edict about joining RMT picket lines.

Popular support for such policies already exists and the link can be made between soaring utility bills and the private providers' profits. Already there are thousands signing up to a grassroots 'Can't pay, Won't pay' campaign.

The audience for this speech is not really labour activists or even the general public. It is a much more restricted elite who are enthusiastic peddlers of the ideology of Starmer's Never Never Land. The Labour leader wants to convince the establishment, the bosses and the media barons that the Corbyn threat is dead and buried and that a Starmer government will tinker a bit here and there but will manage affairs in their interests.

Although such policies will not enthuse or mobilise working people it does not mean that Starmer cannot defeat Truss or Sunak in an election within the next two years. After 13 years of Tory government and the gross incompetence and dishonesty of the Johnson regime, it is difficult to see

the Tories regain the ground lost. Starmer's callous witch hunting of the left and dishonesty around his pledges may enrage many labour movement activists but has little impact on the general public. His gamble on Beergate where he promised to stand down if he received a Covid fine does enable him to differentiate himself from the Tories. He will continue to play the role of the 'honest', competent manager and Mr Anti-Corbyn.

The left has to support all the ongoing struggles, build the campaign to defend public ownership of rail and the utilities and expose the Never Never Land of Starmer's politics. After the speech Jeremy Corbyn tweeted:

This is a cost of living crisis where greed, profits and inequality continue to grow. There are more billionaires and more people forced into using food banks than at any other point in history.

This scandal demands immediate action. The way forward has to be a radical economic alternative, including public ownership of rail, energy, water and the Royal Mail.

We must recognise that most workers have seen cuts in wages over the past decade, whilst bosses take home record pay and bonuses. Now is the time for a bold alternative to the poverty, misery and desperation faced by millions of families in our communities and workplaces.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 27 Jul 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/starmers-never-never-land/>
- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.