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The decision of the British people to leave the European Union came as a shock and disappointment to many on the left. But while creating serious difficulties, it also offers us the opportunity to reboot our politics and reshape our economy. The left should resist Conservative attempts to see it as a validation of their free market approach. Instead, the rights of the social chapter should be guaranteed, while we look to new opportunities outside of the EU.

The vote to break away from the EU came as a shock to many – including some who campaigned for that result. Disappointed as many of us on the centre-left were, this is an opportunity to determine anew what sort of country we want to become.

Some see a chance to go back to the free market thinking of the 1980s. But that approach would exacerbate the issues highlighted by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson in *The Spirit Level*, their powerful analysis of the damaging effects of inequality across a range of social factors. It would cement a society of haves and have nots – the very situation that gave rise to Brexit – and double down on the divide between the so-called winners and losers of globalisation.

Alternatively, this could be an opportunity to tackle inequality and bring people together, an approach that sits more comfortably with the values of the Labour party and which would enable people to feel included and able to move forward in society. The provision of decent employment is central to achieving these goals.

But how are we going to do this from outside of the EU? There is no settlement yet on what our future relationship will look like, but it seems likely that the free movement of people will come to an end. That decision alone is likely to lead to a massive shortage of available labour for some of the occupations less favoured by UK citizens; the agricultural sector, for example, relies on workers from overseas to do the picking and the planting. But this could force upwards pressure on wages and conditions as employers attempt – aided, ideally, by government legislation – to make the jobs they provide a more attractive prospect for UK workers.

Similarly, the hospitality and social care sectors rely heavily on EU labour. But according to the latest Jobs Outlook Survey conducted by the Recruitment Employers Confederation, employers are already flagging up a shortage of candidates for permanent and temporary posts in these areas.

So what would a plan look like that would aim to narrow the gap between the top and bottom of society and which would, via the world of work, enable people to advance in their career, improve their living standards and contribute towards the growth of our economy in a post-Brexit landscape?

Let us start with education, the vehicle which should lead to greater prosperity and a richer, fuller life.

The mantra of the Blair government of the late 90s was ‘education, education, education’. And successive Labour governments certainly led to a big improvement in standards and qualifications. But the emphasis

on and higher funding for academic learning and qualifications was a mistake. There is a snobbishness about academic learning in this country which has been with us for many years and which is not helped by a belief that good GCSEs and A-levels are the only valuable educational outcomes.

To this day schools are funded and rewarded by the number of young people staying on in the sixth form and the percentage of pupils gaining five good GCSEs. Not only does this neglect or undervalue the skills or abilities of non-academic children, it positively discourages the school from pointing a young person towards vocational learning. Many schools will not allow company representatives in to talk about apprenticeships even though they may be a better route for some pupils, because it is not in their financial or status interests to do so. It cannot be beyond the wit of the Department for Education to devise a recognition and reward system which recognises vocational as well as academic achievement.

What's more, there is a serious shortage of girls studying maths and science subjects. Qualifications in these areas generally lead to well-paid and rewarding careers. The report of the 2006 Women and Work Commission, *Towards a Fairer Future*, recommended two things which still hold true. It noted that girls and boys approach maths and science very differently and based on evidence presented they recommended that girls and boys should be taught these subjects in separate classes. The report also promoted the Computer Clubs for Girls programme which recognised that girls' interests are very different from those of boys and proceeded to teach IT to girls in a way that caught their imagination and interest. While some say this is pandering to stereotypes, the programme has proven to be very successful in helping girls to maintain an interest in a subject previously thought by many of them to be geeky and not for them.

Many employers bewail the fact that it is hard to recruit apprentices. This is not helped by the issues raised above but neither do enough employers cast their nets widely enough to interest or include girls and young women in male dominated areas of work. Women into Science and Engineering (WISE) has done good work helping employers to present images in their publicity material which do not put women off and which would help a female applicant to believe the ad was aimed at her.

Employers must be encouraged to continue with training and apprenticeship opportunities even though many will be feeling financially worried following the Brexit vote. We will never be able to compete on the global stage unless we have a well skilled and engaged workforce and the likelihood of simply importing those skills is fast slipping away. It is more important than ever, then, to invest in a homegrown future.

Alongside a need to improve the skills base we need to more seriously address the productivity gap. As Nita Clarke of the IPA writes elsewhere in this pamphlet, employee engagement is the missing piece of the productivity puzzle. Back in 2011, David Cameron launched an initiative entitled 'Engage for Success', which is a not for profit organisation standing for better work and better working lives which it promotes through events and its website.

It is said that the preponderance of low-paid low-skilled work is at the heart of our poor productivity performance. Improving skills and helping people to feel valued automatically encourages a feeling of ownership which in turn produces a greater willingness to contribute to the greater good of the workplace or company. Much of the work done by the IPA on this subject is carried out in conjunction with the relevant trade union, demonstrating that the presence of a union with good relations with the employer is not a substitute for an understanding of

the value of engagement. The best of all worlds would encourage both.

The government's Catapult High Value Manufacturing Scheme, which is designed to enable innovative ideas to be translated into products, is helping employers and others to research new and innovative ways of using the latest technological ideas and equipment. Its strategy encompasses developing large scale projects to help transform major manufacturing markets and supply chains, to create collaborative relationships with universities and research councils and to strengthen capability and competence. This initiative is welcome and to be supported and encouraged. We will need to be at the top of our manufacturing game if we are to broker good trade deals with our international competitors in our post-Brexit future.

Digital platforms, which constitute what is known in the EU area as the 'collaborative economy', are a fast growing part of the casual, slightly loose employment life based upon an individual and a client connecting together to do short, task-based work. The EU has expressed concern about the possible lack of adequate consumer and social protection in the collaborative economy and has conducted a consultation exercise and run workshops to identify issues and develop a deeper understanding of the implication of the growth of this sector of the economy.

Guidance and rules are likely to be introduced by the EU to ensure protection of the users of the digital economy across Europe. But once the UK is outside of the EU, where will the protection for UK citizens come from? And given that technology does not respect or understand borders between nations, how will UK citizens be protected from wrongdoing on inter-European deals?

Many protections for UK employees stem from Europe. Within months of the Labour government being elected in 1997, the social chapter was introduced with a great fanfare from the trade union movement. It gave UK citizens access

to rights such as equal terms for part-time workers, protection when a business changes hands, maternity and paternity rights, four weeks holiday entitlement, equal pay and many more. These have been described by many Conservative MPs as 'red tape' and therefore a nuisance; the post-Brexit future doesn't look good. The trade unions will have to play a key role in negotiating deals with employers to retain rights and protections which workers have enjoyed for many years.

Unfortunately union density is not as high as we would like to see. It is much easier to talk of recruiting in unorganised sectors than it is to actually do it. There is no history of unionisation in the retail sector, social care is so fragmented it is hard for unions to deliver a cohesive message and despite attempts over the years unionising the hotel and catering industry remains a tricky proposition.

One major trade union success in recent years has been the unionlearn programme. Appreciated by employers, it has given thousands of workers the tools to improve their lives and their work opportunities. Starved of funds by this government it should be seen as a priority for the future.

There is no silver bullet to solve today's employment dilemmas. But much can and will be achieved by investment in education, training and research, and by taking a partnership partnership approach to productivity and growth, and by enabling women to participate in the labour market to their full capacity. All of this will be harder without the protection and strength provided by membership of the European Union. Yet it prompts us to consider what kind of country we want to live in, and thus provides a chance to renew our economic and industrial strategy for the digital age.