

# Why I am sticking with Labour

The MP for Norwich South on the fractured left and the future of the party.

By **Clive Lewis**

In a packed fringe meeting at the Labour Party conference in 1980, cigarette smoke hung thickly beneath dim, flickering lights. Amid the hum of tense whispers and shifting chairs, Shirley Williams stood, resolute and defiant, her voice slicing through the haze: “We are going to fight to save the party, and by God we think we can. We are going to start fighting for a Labour Party worthy of the name.” Yet barely a year later, Williams and her allies – soon to be known infamously as the Gang of Four – left Labour altogether, founding the new Social Democratic Party.

Why begin an article about my decision to remain within Labour with a quote that, in hindsight, didn’t even survive the year? Three reasons.

First, because today I, along with many others inside the Labour Party, feel exactly as Shirley Williams did when she uttered those words. This is not a Labour government worthy of the name. From its morally hollow alignment with a far-right US president amidst war crimes and probable genocide in Gaza, to its embrace of a discredited economic orthodoxy reliant on trickle-down myths, deregulation, and corporate extraction, this is not the principled, people-first politics we were promised. Add to this the normalisation of racist rhetoric about migrants and asylum seekers and the punitive policies targeting disabled people – from threatened cuts to Personal Independence Payments to real-terms reductions in Universal Credit. Then, there is the introduction of some of the most draconian laws this country has seen outside wartime, including proscribing protest groups as terrorists. Now it becomes painfully clear: something has gone profoundly wrong.

Like Shirley Williams then – and countless others from both the left and right throughout Labour's history – I believe remaining in the party (as long as that option is open) and fighting for its soul is the right choice. For all its faults, Labour remains the political vehicle that has done more than any other to improve the lives of working-class people in Britain. That legacy isn't just worth defending; it demands our defence.

Secondly, given the increasing fragmentation of British politics – and the very real possibility that the Labour-Conservative duopoly, which has defined our political landscape for over eighty years, might finally unravel – the events of 1981 now look less like a historical footnote and more like an urgent warning. The SDP failed on its own terms, but the two-party system that it aimed to break open never really recovered from its intervention.

So, what, if anything, has today's Labour leadership learnt from the emergence of the new left party? What deeper economic, social, and environmental forces are shaping this moment? And how might we navigate the storm of intersecting crises we now face?

Judging by their reaction thus far: very little. Within Labour circles, responses have been defined more by dismissive sneers than serious reflection. But the hundreds of thousands expressing interest in the new party should serve as a profound wake-up call. This isn't a fringe rebellion, it's an indication that the foundations of our electoral system are cracking. Discontent of this magnitude doesn't emerge from nowhere, nor will it vanish if ignored.

Even if you share the leadership's apparent wish that the left be locked away and forgotten, history demonstrates that suppressing dissent doesn't neutralise it – it energises it. Those turning toward this new party are not extremists or radicals, but ordinary people repeatedly told that their entirely reasonable demands (a fair economy, genuine democracy, and meaningful climate action) are dangerous delusions. That lie has a limited shelf life, and we may well be reaching its expiry date.

Third, Shirley Williams' instinct in 1980 to remain in the party, was fundamentally right, an instinct shared by myself and many others today. The fight ahead against authoritarian and anti-democratic forces will only intensify. How and where we engage in this struggle must be strategic. Effective strategy against a capable and adaptive opponent demands keeping as many paths open as possible, resisting premature narrowing unless the landscape unmistakably demands it.

This strategic calculation lies at the heart of current tensions. Many see this as the decisive moment to commit fully to the new left project. They might well be correct. And those of us still holding the line within Labour, even cautiously, may yet be proven wrong. But we must also acknowledge the unknowns surrounding the new project. Its political culture remains largely untested. There is a genuine risk of fragmentation and recrimination. Prudence advises us to maintain fallback positions and avoid burning bridges prematurely. We must recognise there are many fronts in this fight. I understand deeply the anger towards this Labour government – anger shared by many still within the party. Yet dismissing those who choose to engage within Labour, the Greens, or elsewhere neither advances our cause nor aligns with the pluralist politics this moment demands.

We all have roles to play. Thousands choose to fight from within Labour; others do so externally, whether in a political party or campaign groups and broader civil society. What matters is mutual support and solidarity among all committed to democracy, social and climate justice, pluralism, and human rights – across parties and factions. Ultimately, my choice is guided by strategic judgement, not certainty. In these turbulent political times, certainty is a luxury none of us possess. Yet, I sincerely hope the path I've chosen contributes meaningfully and that, regardless of the routes we each take, we find ways to converge again when it truly matters.