Parties on the verge of a nervous breakdown

Stuart Hall

Both right and left of British politics are in need of a 'grand idea'. Stuart Hall *examines the dangers on both sides of the political spectrum: the possibility of a new grand idea from the far right, and the lack of one - so far - on the left.*

The Tory Party: devices and desires

The more one sees of political parties, and the ways they are driven hither and thither, often at the whim of deeply irrational and unconscious forces, the more one is tempted to anthropomorphise them. They behave like partially crazed adolescents, tossed about by powerful undercurrents of emotion and uncontrollable spasms which are not amenable to a purely rational or empirical analysis. The Tory party is undergoing this kind of 'crisis', and nothing will 'resolve' it until some catharsis, the shape of which we cannot fully foresee, intervenes. Mr Major's leadership election 'gamble' has only postponed this. It is not enough to have saved the Conservative Party from the collective nervous breakdown which is afflicting it.

At a tactical level, however, the move was rather effective. It has temporarily silenced his Euro-sceptic critics and enemies, that party of *enrages* now glowering

in silence behind him on the back benches. It has temporarily seen off the rivalrous knights, jostling around his back to deliver the final *coup de grace*. Portillo is temporarily stymied, and safely tucked away in an armoured vehicle temporarily on its way - figuratively - to Bosnia. Lamont made a fatal hesitation at the final hour and is lost. And Heseltine played the loyalty game so long and so deviously that he seems to have become trapped by his own web. This is bad news for the Heselteenies, but worse for Labour. The latter still seem to believe there is mileage to be made out of speculating on what the enhanced job of the Deputy Prime Minister could be. It is no mystery. His task is to clobber the Opposition, mercilessly and relentlessly, for the next eighteen mondis, a task for which he is superbly well fitted. He will also take some prisoners from John Humphreys on the *Today* programme - particularly bad news for Labour, since he is manifestly the only politician of any party currently capable of doing so.

'A large proportion of the Conservative Party is bewitched by the dream of an extremist, Thatcherite, revivalism'

Will all this save John Major? Can it save the Tory Party from electoral defeat? I doubt it. But, in my view, it will be a closer-run thing, when we come to the election, than the Labour leadership, the press, Rupert Murdoch and Paul Johnson seem to think. Tactical moves won't save John Major because, given the mood to be found at the centre of gravity of the Tory Party, and the delicate balance of factions clustering there, his brand of low-flying pragmatism is not enough. Too large a proportion of the Conservative Party, inside and outside Parliament, are bewitched by the dream of an extremist, Thatcherite, revivalism to settle for 'wait and see'. I don't mean that they want Lady Thatcher back - one look at her performances on TV makes it abundantly clear that, though she no doubt harbours illusions, her moment has passed. What the Tory faithful, of whatever faction, simply cannot exorcise is that deep hunger, that un-nameable desire, that gnaws at their political guts, for the return of the 'feel good factor' which Mrs T at the height of her powers gave them - which has very little to do with economic performance, consumer confidence and growth rates, and everything to do with being part of a revivalist crusade, of marching in the ranks of the latter-day free market 'Saints'. It is a conversion experience, not just an electoral victory, they are after: the 'two intellectual leaps' which Enoch Powell made first and 'which Keith Joseph and I would only make some years later' *(The*

Path to *Power);* what Peter Clarke has recently identified, in his review of Lady Thatcher's book, as the Joan of Arc moment, summoned by voices - 'I heard myself saying, "Look Keith if you're not going to stand, I will because someone who represents our viewpoint *has* to stand"' ('Maggiefication', Peter Clarke, in *London Review of Booh,* 6 July 1995).

If *the* Tories are ever to recover from their collective derangement, then only such a spirit of revivalism will do, and in that respect, Mr Major is not for burning. Where then is it to be found? How long would it take to get it into place to carry a 'popular majority' in the country (i.e. a tactically composed, geographically dispersed minority, which is what has actually 'won' elections in our system since the 1970s)? And who could 'personify' it (for, like all charismatic sectarianisms, it requires its 'personification')?

There is only one such political configuration on offer, only one place for the Tory Party, constituted as it currently is politically, to go: that is, towards some reconstituted or reconfigured combination of virulent, sectarian, free marketism, coupled (paradoxically) with a massive dose of social revanchism masquerading under the umbrella of 'family values', secured below by a revivalist 'Little Englandism'. The same basic ingredients as 'Thatcherism', but revamped and reshaped to the new conjuncture. The recipe, when concocted, will appear to have been sutured together with, I suspect, a very strong infusion of 'Gingrich-ism', borrowed from the highly successful example of the American Republican revival - dissolution of the welfare state and 'contract with the British people' and all. Even now, late at night, the lights in his private sanctuary high in the Ministry of Defence blazing into the darkness, Mr Portillo is studying the Gingrich blueprint. Every time one hears on late night radio the voices of the pentecostalists of the Adam Smith Institute as they tremble with a deep irrationalism, one knows that the free market extremists, with their crack-pot Benthamite schemes and their loony remedies, are on the loose again, waiting in the wings for their conduit to power.

'Even now, late into the night, Mr Portillo is studying the Gingrich blue print'

As for 'Little Englandism', for a deep, deeply irrational, largely unconscious, defensive and ab-reactive chauvinism, this is the most powerful and the most popular vein in the whole ensemble; and the name which summons it is not, as it was in Mrs Thatcher's more optimistic time, 'Great Britain Limited', but

'Europe'. Europe has become the fetish, the displaced signifier, the repository into which all those dark and unrequited elements of the collective British psyche have been decanted: the hatred of all foreigners, not just black or brown ones; the deep resentment at the transformation of what used to be 'Great Britain' into some ill-defined and ignominious third-rate, off-continental, junior partner in the affairs that now shape and drive the world; a profound sense of 'loss' of the old values, the old ways of life, the old customs, the old verities - the sort of dissolution of past glories in which a people are profoundly invested, which drives nations crazy. This is what 'being against Europe' has come to stand for. And though no-one can suppose that Mrs Gorman will be able to personify this mood on the highest political stage, everyone in the Tory Party knows that this heady ensemble, this mix, is the only popular current of feeling in the country into which a disaggregated party of the right can tap. So all the jockeyings represent a collective, instinctive search for someone who can do what Mrs Thatcher in her time did: embody, represent, personify - effect the linkage between this inchoate surge of feeling in the country and the main thrust of policy in government and the state.

'Europe has become the fetish, the displaced signifier, of the dark and unrequited elements of the collective British psyche'

'Personally, I was conscious that in some strange way I was instinctively speaking and feeling in harmony with the great majority of the population. Such moments are as unforgettable as they are rare. They must be seized to change history' *(The Path to Power).* It is the dream - the illusion - that such a moment, though extremely rare, must and will come again, which keeps the uncertain heartbeat of the Tory Party going. My guess is that, now Mr Major's position has been temporarily secured, the party cannot nurture, cultivate and crystallise such a popular mood in the country into an active electoral constituency before the election; and that, without it, it will do considerably better than anyone seems to expect at the election, but cannot, or may not, recover sufficiently to win.

Everything, then, cannot be resolved until *after* the 'catharsis' of the general election. It is in the wake of electoral defeat that the final reckoning with Mr Major will probably come; and, as they see it, it is in a brief but necessary period in opposition that the internal reconstruction will be undertaken to prepare the renovated party and the revitalised constituencies in the country for another

long, hegemonic period in office - a second Calvinist dispensation. In short, the resolution for the Tories lies in a 'knight's move' - finessing through Mr Major to .. . ? I think this particular future belongs to Mr Portillo, who, despite his *gaffes* and hesitations during the leadership crisis, is the only figure of Cabinet rank and seniority, apart from Peter Lilley, with that demoniacal light of exaltation in his eye, and a certain passionate, romantic nationalist wildness to carry it off. But here the crystal-ball begins to darken over…

The Labour Party and the Blair resolution

What, then, of the alternative - the camp of the modernising saints and the Blair revolution? With a remarkable show of political courage and a flair for presentation, Mr Blair has set out to conquer Labour and to colonise political opinion in what by any reckoning has been a remarkable year, if not exactly an *annus mirabilis*. It is safe to say that Mr Blair has done what no Labour politician - including Mr Kinnock and Mr Smith, significant though their contributions were - has been able to accomplish, or what indeed has seemed impossible in the dark night of the Thatcher years: reconstruct an electable Labour Party and put it in a possible winning position. It has been a considerable achievement - so unlikely, indeed, that it sometimes appears that those who have participated most in bringing it about can hardly breathe, in case they bring the whole edifice tumbling down like dominoes. For the realists know it is not as sure-fire and foolproof as it appears to be. Despite the distance travelled, given the electoral arithmetic, it may not be quite enough. And there are many signs, of which Mr Blair is perfectly aware, that a lot of the support is as 'soft' as new-fallen snow. A puff of wind, or the announcement of the date of the election, will sweep a good 20 per cent of it away, for a start.

We know what the Tory 'revolution' would be, if only they could bring it off. But what is the 'Blair' revolution? What shift or current of feeling among the great majority of the population is he 'instinctively speaking and feeling in harmony with'?

Reshaping the Party

The first question is much easier to answer than the second. The 'Blair revolution' has been pre-eminently focused on transforming and reshaping the Labour Party, making it electable and, at the same time, the effective engine of his political

ambitions and aspirations. No-one should underestimate the achievement here. There were always two aspects to any Labour revival: the first had to do, broadly speaking, with *modernisation,* the second with a political strategy and programme for the country which *both* addressed the major social and economic problems confronting *the* society in a novel and distinctive way, clearly contrasting its approach with that which had governed the previous regime, *and* at the same time captured the popular imagination, crystallising the disparate and sometimes contradictory elements of dissatisfaction into a new configuration, a new kind of politics. It is clear that, for Mr Blair, the test-bed of the first aspect - modernisation - has been the Labour Party itself, and there quite remarkable things have been accomplished. It is also no secret that this has been a far more successful venture than the second strand, where the 'seizing of moments' is less in evidence.

'It is to Mr Blair's credit that he has courageously blasted the party free from some of its encrustations'

The refashioning of Labour - the apotheosis of the dreadful sloganised 'New Labour' - was necessary, but always promised to be a painful task. Political traditions are absolutely necessary for any political party, but there is all the difference in the world between confronting the radical novelty and contingency of the future from within a deeply grounded 'sense of history', as a resource, and being imprisoned - frozen - by the past.

The Labour Party has, for long, been immured in the second of those positions and it is, largely if not entirely, to Mr Blair's credit that he has courageously grasped the necessity of blasting the party free of some of these encrustations. The idea that the Labour Party ought to be more open and democratic in its procedures, less governed by caucus and clique, was instinctively right. The need to make it more of a recruiting party with a mass membership that meant something, less of a party whose *raison d'etre* rested on bureaucratic forms of representation, seemed both right and inevitable.

Being old enough to remember when the trade union barons were regularly wheeled out by the right to clobber any radical or democratic initiative, I could never persuade myself that this was a good way of conducting democratic business for a political party that needed to be constantly in touch with the actual movement of political opinion. So that when the same bureaucracies were persuaded to use their muscle in defence of left-wing causes, it seemed to me that

it was the principle and the method not simply the expedient result, which was the problem. It is certainly the case that certain sectors of workers in the labour market have never needed the protection of the unions as much as they do now. But, with certain key exceptions, these are not fhe union leaderships that have had most influence in reshaping Labour thinking or culture. Few of them have been in the vanguard of rethinking the relations of representation between unions and their members in ways which make the critical move from being an interest-group to becoming a 'national' form of political representation (i.e. one which could see that the struggle between miners and the Coal Board, or between train drivers and British Rail is, and is likely to be in the future, 'settled' by the weight of feeling amongst the great majority of 'consumers' who are neither). Without that shift, Mr Blair was right to think that the old way of giving the unions a voice inside the Labour Party was one which would only operate on the side of conserving and preserving the old bureaucratic culture of Labour, rather than on the side of modernisation, democratisation and change. This is not to support every move he has made in the area of rethinking the relations between the party and the unions, but it is to commend the instinct of modernisation that took him to this difficult front.

> The Labour Party has never been within a million light years of taking all of industry into common ownership'

Clause IV and public ownership

I am even less in sympathy with conventional left thinking on these issues where Clause IV is concerned. It is not as if the revision of Clause IV represented a major decommitment from a policy of principle to which Labour was formerly committed and which was a centrepiece of Labour's strategic thinking. As far as I am aware, the Labour Party has never been during my lifetime, and certainly is not now, within a million light-years of taking all of productive industry, of the full fruits of workers' labour by hand and brain, into common ownership. Such a commitment *may* just have made sense when it was first stitched up, in one of those clever, backstairs, conference redrafting 'deals' in which the Webbs so often had a hand. But it has absolutely no bearing, in its old form, on the world of the later twentieth century; nor does it represent an adequate response of a party to the whole, disastrous experience of 'state socialism' which came to so abrupt and

dramatic an end in 1989, in the light of which the entire historical basis and trajectory of 'the left' in serious politics has *had* to be rethought. The opinion which was expressed at the time of its revision, that Labour needed Clause IV, not because anyone believed in it or intended to implement it, but because, like Everest, 'it was *there',* is the remnant of a totemistic form of thought, and has nothing to do with a modem political party attempting to develop a serious alternative political position for the twenty-first century. The opinion, which some serious figures on the left expressed at the time, that Labour could no more send its troops into electoral battle without Clause IV than Britain could send its troops into battle without the Union Jack, was so unnerving, so revealing in its unconscious implications, so eloquent of a political culture rivetted to empty symbols and a vacuous rhetoric, as to be seriously embarrassing to contemplate.

Of course, there is a place for forms of public ownership, social intervention and regulation in a variety of forms in the so-called market economy, as the public response to, say, the privatisation of water, the unscrupulous greed of the managements of the new public utilities, the scandal of rail privatisation and the effective derailing of Heseltine's attempt to privatise the Post Office clearly demonstrates. Of course, this real, substantive, issue of economic regulation and the harnessing of market forces within a social framework has been hopelessly fudged by the Blair reforms. The new wording for Clause IV is grammatically - not to mention politically - incomprehensible. It reveals, in the nervous incoherence of its syntax, its failure to think through serious issues in depth. But it was not wrong to try to reword it so as to bring it a millimetre closer to something that might and could actually come to pass in our lifetimes. Here, Mr Blair's instinct - that no party could survive so enormous a gap between words and deeds, rhetoric and intention - was correct; and the result is not to be dismissed as yet another inevitable example of a 'sell-out', as the absolutely predictable and automatic 'hard left' response would have it.

By these and other measures, equally courageously undertaken, Mr Blair has not only been consistent to the political 'project' which brought him to power, but courageous in the way he has pushed it through. In terms of the parliamentary battle, he has proven himself an excellent and articulate performer. The leadership 'machine' is also in much better shape - though it is being run as a 'tight battle ship', on the inner-circle basis, by a smart but over-confident kitchen cabinet-in-waiting, with an extremely limited range of

intellectual and policy-sensitive views available to it, a few chosen academic and journalistic voices managed into place when the young tyros run out of fresh ideas themselves, and is powerfully 'Presidential' in style. It may be that successful modern political parties have to be run along these lines. But the one crucial ingredient which is conspicuously lacking, and for which the inner Praetorian guard are themselves serving as the inadequate substitute, is an open, and public *dialogue* with a very broad section of what may be called organic intellectual opinion (in which, of course, I include those critical *cadres* who run the voluntary organisations, or those with bright ideas to reform public administration, the NHS and local government, just as much as free-floating academics). Yet this is exactly the sort of construction of a public forum, of an intellectual ferment of ideas (not from a few, tame, party intellectuals only) which one would *expect* from a radical party facing office in profoundly changed social, economic and global conditions after sixteen years in the political wilderness. Here, the technical successes of the Blair style of New Labour leadership begin to reveal their limits.

'The one crucial ingredient which is conspiciously lacking is an open and public dialogue'

New ideas for new times?

What of *the* other prong of the 'project'?... the opening up of a new political alternative; the sketching out of a viable new politics of Labour for 'new times'; clearly addressed to what is novel and dislocating in the global circumstances in which Labour might return to office; realistic in its recognition of the limits in speed and scope imposed both by the decline in manoeuvrability of the nation-state in the new global environment *and* by the fact that Britain remains fundamentally one of the least successful, declining members of the new economic club; and yet *selectively* directed at sketching out, by way of a sort of demonstration effect, some radically bold and novel ways of tackling *some* of the key issues; enough at least to show that Thatcherism, which appeared inevitably to command the first stage of these 'new times', was only one, possible, deeply flawed, way of addressing the dilemma; and thus capable of constructing apolitical constituency for change out of the varied and dispersed or disaggregated movements. Any signs of this in the 'Blair agenda'? 1 am afraid there are not. For some months, many of us who were fundamentally well-disposed to trying to make

the Blair reform movement work persuaded ourselves that the reason none of this was in evidence was *tactical*. They had lots of plans, lots of ideas bubbling around, had drawn very widely on the thinking that had been going on during the Thatcher era. It was simply that they weren't going to just spill them out and get caught, like last time, on the hook of 'how does Labour propose to cost these?' They were biding their time. The ideas would be 'unveiled' at the strategically correct moment, each accompanied by a well-directed popular mobilisation building one key constituency after another - disgruntled NHS patients here, disillusioned parents and teachers next, traffic jammed commuters there - leading up to the crowning issue: how to remodel the welfare state while sustaining the basic public philosophy out of which it sprang. But this hasn't happened.

'There must be a better way of doing things than this lot'

I used the term 'demonstration effect' because I recognise that the discipline of popular opinion, which has moved significantly against the Thatcher tide, but certainly not as far as a massive redistributive programme, would place considerable constraints on what Labour could promise to do - *and* get elected. That made it doubly important that each part of the reform policy programme, though limited seriously in scope and effect, would clearly and publicly exemplify the radically new and distinctive thinking it embodied, clearly demonstrating precisely that here *is* an alternative (to the Thatcherite, free market forces, little England chauvinist way of thinking) and that Labour has some conception of what this other kind of politics might be - and of how it would make the country feel, look and be a different place to live in. If there is a post-Thatcherist mood in the country, this surely is what it is. There must be a better way of doing things than this lot. We've tried their way and it's failing. What other reason would there be for voting Labour for the vast majority of non genetically-programmed potential Labour voters?

It was always a possibility that the Labour modernisation programme would read the lessons of Thatcherism incorrectly. The lesson was - the times they are a-changing, and Thatcherism is the most effective way of trying to colonise these changes within a radical programme from the right. The left, however defined, must respect and address the changes - but from its own distinctive analysis and programme, with its own historic alternative. Instead 'New Labour' seems to have interpreted the lesson of Thatcherism as - the times are changing and

Thatcherism managed for a while to hegemonise them for the right. The left should therefore model itself as closely as possible on what the right did. This strategy of accommodation wins certain friends and influences certain people - especially detached voters and the press. As to whether it constitutes a powerful and persuasive enough reason for ordinary folk to vote Labour remains open to considerable doubt.

There is a simple test. Ask any potentially sympathetic but non-politically committed person, who has some grievance with any aspect of current policy, to describe how they imagine things will or could be done differently under Labour. I am willing to bet good money that they will be unable to do so. They know that under the Tory health service reforms one of the most precious, efficient, cost-effective and socially-supportive measures ever put forward to win public support in a modern democracy was put in jeopardy. They know that all was not well with the old NHS, but they know that what has happened to it under the Tories is of a different order of obscenity. The notion that *only* by faithfully 'mimicking the market' can an organisation be made efficient is basically unsound. People know that the pall of hypocritical double talk, the concealing cloak which Mrs Bottomley dispensed over the whole scene, was absolutely paradigmatic of the mode of institutionalised deceit which characterises the current Tory form of government. How will this complex of issues be addressed in the NHS under a Labour government? We do not know. The public has no clear conception. It sort of knows that some bits of the reforms are to be kept, and some are not. People have a vague feeling, since Britain has the most cost-effective public health system and spends a lower proportion of its GDP on health than most advanced industrial societies, that, though 'we can't just throw money at it', the proportion of national wealth 'transferred' by public means through the NHS ought to rise. Under Labour, will it? It will not.

'How will this complex of issues be addressed under a Labour government? We do not know'

Well, why not? Because this is actually the right proportion to spend on health? Not at all. It is because Labour is so committed to out-doing the Tory government in public financial probity that no further funds can be raised by public taxation for *anything.* Now it is perfectly true that public spending and borrowing levels will have to be rigorously controlled by a Labour government.

On the other hand, a Labour government which cannot spend an extra penny from any source on health, the education system, public housing, community, family and caring services, transport and a strategic element of security in the labour market, is not worth voting for. Money isn't everything. But nothing fundamental will happen in *any* of these social areas which is cost-free. It follows that two or three of these areas should have been prioritised, the limited tax targets to fund them clearly and firmly established, the immediate 'ratepayer reaction' weathered at least two years *before* the election, and then the slow reconstruction of an element of public funding and targeted redistributive taxation begun as a long term project to turn the tide of the 80s 'ratepayer revolution' as part of a wider Labour strategy. One law of the Medes and Persians is that Labour is *always* more cautious, more conservative, in office than before it. What it does not campaign about beforehand, it will be mastered and driven by afterwards. The 1970s immigration legislation was the paradigm case where, having failed to campaign to educate its own and other constituencies while out of office, it found itself driven in office hurriedly to legislate in a basically anti-immigrant and racist way. This writing on the wall is now staring us in the face again, over the whole critical range of social policies which is precisely where the Thatcherite consensus fractured. Not to address this agenda in an accent and voice significantly clear, unambiguous and distinctive from that of your rivals, is a fundamental, strategic political miscalculation.

What Labour does not campaign about before office, it will be mastered and driven by afterwards'

Labour's conservative modernity

When Bill Clinton took office, there was a feeling among many younger Americans that at least here was a figure who had had the kind of political experience they had, who somehow belonged to the same political generation as they did. It didn't last. There was a similar phenomenon with Tony Blair. Here was someone who seemed to be born and to have grown up in the same political generation, through the same historical experiences as younger voters. He actually knew the Sixties, had participated in the social movements, was married and bringing up young kids in Thatcher's Britain, may even know an unmarried mother or even have a friend who was HIV positive. He was, in generation at

least, a post-feminist man. We could expect him, not to become the mouthpiece for these 'new times', but to know on his political pulses what it was all about. Out of office, he seemed to be a personable young politician, who had the great virtue of being able to listen to people, who might be looking for ways of enabling these novel sociological currents of feeling to break back into, and wreak a subtle transformation of, the traditional culture and programme of Labour.

But, in leadership, the impression he creates is almost the diametrical opposite. Mr Blair is a sort of 'new' or modern man, but a deeply conservative version of the species. On crime, on family values, on one-parent families, on questions of sexuality, on the particular variant of communitarianism which he espouses, one can find no echo at all of the underlying sociological analysis that one would expect of a so-called 'moderniser'. The idea that, at the end of the twentieth century, after the revolution in the position of women and in sexual attitudes we have passed through, it would be possible to advance the 'modernisation' of British society by an ideological commitment to the monogamous nuclear family as the only credible and stable family form, gives 'modernity' such a deeply conservative inflection that it hardly deserves the name.

Of course there are serious questions to be asked about parenting, about a sense of responsibility and mutual reciprocity and commitment in relationships, as there are about standards in education and the dissolution of the social fabric under the assault of 'there is no society' Thatcherite familial individualism. But a species of communitarianism which depends on sending women back to the hearth to 'conserve social values', which stigmatises the possibility of creating caring and loving places for children to grow up in who don't conform to the traditional nuclear norm, where the sense of community is most effectively embodied in the local noise patrol, is fundamentally regressive socially. It derives from that spurious new-Democrat, neo-Republican Etzionian model - one of the very few ideas which seems to have penetrated the core of Blair thinking - whose main function is somehow to promise to square the circle between a new deal for 'women' *and* an old deal for 'mothers'. To adapt another too frequently quoted Blair slogan, it's back to 'tough on the causes of women's oppression, tough on women'!

> It's back to tough on the causes of women's oppression, tough on women'

On education, where if anywhere there is a popular agitation waiting to be developed, Mr Blair seems profoundly, one might even think wilfully, blind to

the way a so-called modernisation programme, which takes 'standards' seriously but neglects the demands of the great mass of the children's education, aids the creeping advance of 'selectivity'. His stance - including I'm afraid the lack of touch with respect to the education of his own children - reproduces the most ancient and reactionary of the old class structures of educational privilege, totally at variance with any serious 'modernising' project, and in terms of the new global competitive environment, sociologically naive. And so on down the list.

'Mr Blair's stance reproduces the most ancient and reactionary of the old class structures of educational privilege'

'Modernisation' depends on raising the general level of educational achievement, but there is hardly a sound to emerge from the Blair camp about the 'costs' of the Tory expansion of higher education without investment, the crisis of student grants, or the chaos of technical education. Instead Labour is toying with selectivity, with schemes for combining the education and training of young adults with work experience which would take us back to the days before the 1944 Education Act, and a 'university of industry'.

The search for the grand idea

Mr Blair seized his chance in the Labour Party in the period when, on all sides, the search was on to substitute for the exhausted Thatcher project, some alternative 'grand idea'. It never appeared - 'grand ideas', looked for in this way, almost never emerge. However, though it was not of such stunning originality, there was always a very strong and distinctive 'idea' awaiting its Labour personifier.

Fundamentally, what seemed to have 'won' in the long night of Thatcherism was the gut sentiment that, essentially, there was no alternative to a way of life founded on the principles of the unregulated free market. Of course, not many people bought in to this idea wholesale. Still, even those who did not like what it delivered seemed for a time to settle reluctantly for the view that a 'society of the market' works and there was no alternative. What is manifestly clear now, in retrospect, is that this idea, though it provided the spear-head of a massive project of social reconstruction - what elsewhere I called 'regressive modernisation' - has not worked and cannot work.

For a long time, the distinction between the right and the left was stabilised by

the polarisation of attitudes towards markets. The left was characterised by the belief that, since 'the market" *always* creates winners and losers, always creates deep inequalities, and social fragmentation, its remedy was the opposite, the abolition of markets and the absorption of state and economy into the so-called 'planned society' - state socialism. Now we know this doesn't 'work' either. Its costs are writ large in the collapse of the so-called Soviet model and its many variants and the catastrophes which its inauguration in that form brought in its train.

It does not take a genius to work out what, in such circumstances, constitutes 'the grand idea' of democratic politics. Is it possible, and in what form, to harness the significant advantages of the market (supposing for the moment that there is any *one* such thing - which there isn't - and that it is 'free', which it certainly is not), within a logic of social calculation which transcends a market forces conception of society and social need, and an 'economic man' or 'entrepreneurial subject' conception of human nature? Can one show, in thinking, in forms of organisation, in policy and strategy, that there *is* such a thing as 'society', though it is not the closed totality, the sutured closure conceived of by state socialism and all its derivatives (including much of Labourism), but remains fundamentally open to the contingency of historical movement and change - a place of calculation and strategic operations, not an ultimately predictable social essence. This may sound broad and vague - but then all 'grand ideas' usually do. The trick lies in giving this vague and open-ended idea a concrete, late twentieth century 'content' and form.

Somehow, in the back of his head, Mr Blair knew that 'seizing the historical moment' depended on being able to constitute political forms which would enable a society, mesmerised for a time by the chimera of 'market forces', once again to imagine *the social* in the context of the twenty-first century. But the effort to think through in depth what this would mean seems to have been a task too difficult to accomplish, a 'grand idea' too far. In its place, we stand a chance of getting a Labour Government in power again. But I have my doubts that it is driven by an idea, strategy or perspective large enough to capture the popular imagination. Of course, 'such moments are as unforgettable as they are rare', as Mrs Thatcher reminded us. They can also be rather short lived and can end in disaster. One hopes, but without much confidence, that Labour is headed for something a little less ignominious than hat dismal scenario.